V – Feasts of the Menaion

September 1 – The Indiction

IN THE MODERN AGE the world has come to accept one civil calendar which originated in Western Europe centuries ago. Many of us are aware that some groups still maintain an attachment to their historic calendars. The Chinese and Vietnamese, for example stage their own New Year's celebrations according to their ancient calendars, usually in late winter. The Islamic New Year may begin anywhere from mid-October to mid-December. And the Jewish New Year, *Rosh Ha-shanah*, regularly begins in September.

Starting in the last half of the fifth century (probably AD 462), the Byzantine Empire designated September 1 as the first day of the New Year. The Byzantine liturgical year was arranged according to that calendar and September 1 remains the first day of our liturgical year. The cycle of the Church's Great Feasts begin in September with the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8) and conclude in August with the feast of her Dormition (August 15).

Although our contemporary civil calendar begins on January 1, many of our public institutions effectively begin their year in September also. Congress and the courts, the school year, the theater and concert seasons, fundraisers, and other civic events on hold through the summer start up again only after Labor Day. Perhaps the Jews and the Byzantines got it right after all.

The Indiction

The first day of the Church year is called the *Indiction*. Originally referring to the start of a tax assessment cycle in the Roman Empire, this word has come to mean the beginning of a cycle in a more general way and may be found in legal or formal documents to this day. Thus in 2011 Pope Benedict XVI issued a formal letter "For the Indiction [i.e. Beginning] of the Year of Faith." And so calling September 1 an Indiction simply means that it is the start of a new cycle of the feasts, fasts and other observances of our Church.

On this day Byzantine churches read the Gospel of the beginning of Christ's public ministry as recorded in Luke 4:16-22. After reading the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61:1-2 the Lord tells His listeners, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*." The Messiah is at hand: God's plan is on the move.

The "Year of the World"

A lesser-known aspect of the Byzantine calendar is that September 1, AD 2013 is the first day of AM 7522! From AD 691 to 1728 the Byzantine Churches followed a system dating years from the creation of the world according to the calculations in the Book of Genesis (AM, *Anno Mundi*, the Year of the World"). In 1700, during his westernization of Russia, Tsar Peter the Great replaced the Byzantine Era in his realm with the Western Christian Era. A few years later the Patriarchate of Constantinople and all the Churches in the Ottoman Empire followed suit. Formal documents

of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Mount Athos and some other Eastern Church bodies may still indicate the Byzantine Era date along with that according to the Christian Era.

The Jewish calendar is also calculated from the biblical account of creation but there is a c. 2000 year difference between the two reckonings. The Byzantine Era was computed using the Septuagint text of the Old Testament, compiled in the 3rd to 2nd century BC. The Jewish dating is calculated according to the Masoretic version, used by Jews since the first century AD.

Prayer for the Environment

The Genesis story of creation, on which the Byzantine Era was based, has given rise to a new expression in the modern age. In 1989 the late Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I designated September 1 as a day of prayer for the protection of the environment. He called for "prayers and supplications to the Maker of all, both as thanksgiving for the great gift of Creation and in petition for its protection and salvation."

The patriarch noted that modern society has embraced an approach to the world around us, based on a philosophy which denies the existence of God the Creator. Since in this philosophy there is no God, there is no reason to consider creation as a divine gift. And since in this materialistic philosophy there is no higher life than the physical, there is no benefit to ascetic effort: to use the gifts of the earth sparingly and always with an eye to the needs of those who have less. In the patriarch's words, "Unfortunately, in our days under the influence of an extreme rationalism and self-centeredness, humanity has lost the sense of sacredness of creation and acts as its arbitrary ruler and rude violator. Instead of the eucharistic and ascetic spirit with which the Orthodox Church brought up its children for centuries, we observe today a violation of nature for the satisfaction not of basic human needs, but of man's endless and constantly increasing desire and lust, encouraged by the prevailing philosophy of the consumer society."

Christians, the patriarch affirms, should approach the material creation with a eucharistic spirit, that is, with an attitude of thanksgiving, recognizing that it is of God and given to us by His grace. It should be used with an ascetic spirit, that is, according to our real needs rather than from a desire to amass or to out-possess others. An ascetic spirit sees our abundance as given that we may use it in doing good for those in need.

More recently the Pope of Rome, Francis, affirmed similar sentiments, speaking to a crowd in St. Peter's Square. He identified modern society as a "culture of waste," as others have spoken of a throwaway society. "This culture of waste has made us insensitive even to the waste and disposal of food, which is even more despicable when all over the world, unfortunately, many individuals and families are suffering from hunger and malnutrition," the pope said.

"Once our grandparents were very careful not to throw away any leftover food. Consumerism has led us to become used to an excess and daily waste of food, to which, at times we are no longer able to give a just value. Throwing away food is like stealing from the table of the poor and the hungry."

In 2015 Pope Francis added this commemoration to the calendar of the Roman Church.

As we begin the new Church year we can embrace the sentiments of both these hierarchs, by taking a fresh look at the creation in which we live, seeing it as God's gift to us meant to be used with a spirit of simplicity and love for others.

Prayers for the Protection of the Environment

Apolytikion (*Tone 4*) – Lord and Savior, who as God brought all things into being by a word, establishing laws and governing them unerringly to your glory, at the prayers of the Mother of God, keep secure and unharmed all the elements which hold the earth together, and save the universe.

Kontakion (*Tone 2*) – With your all-powerful strength You framed all things, both visible and invisible; and so keep unharmed, we implore your goodness, the environment that surrounds the earth.

Ikos – Loving Savior, we praise the manifestations of your providence and your many saving powers; because with ineffable wisdom and order and harmony You have established for all things laws and unalterable ordinances for the protection of us, your royal fashioning. Keep us unshaken, Lord, from every corrupting activity, change and destruction, as guardian, protector and deliverer of all things, keeping in them the essential power unmoved, and especially watching over the environment that surrounds the earth.

September 8 – Nativity of the Theotokos

The first celebration in this yearly cycle is the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8). Along with the feasts of her conception in the womb of St Anne (December 9) and her entrance into the temple (November 21) this feast tell us that Christ's coming is at hand. The birth of Mary is a prelude to the coming of Christ who took flesh in her womb.

The birth and early years of the Virgin's life were described in the Protoevangelium of James, a 2nd-century 'prequel" to the Gospel events, as we might call it today. The hymns of this feast often refer to the story in the Protoevangelium (e.g. the barrenness of Anne, the angel's message that she would give birth, etc.). More fundamental to our celebration of the birth of the Theotokos is the simple fact that the mother of the Savior is at last with us, beginning our journey to Bethlehem and the celebration of Christ's birth,

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Hymns of Mary's Nativity

Today, God who dominates the Spiritual Thrones of Heaven, welcomes on earth the holy throne which He had prepared from Himself. In His love for mankind, He who established the heavens in wisdom had

fashioned a living heaven. From a barren stem He has brought forth for us His Mother as a branch full of life. O God of miracles, and hope of those who have no hope, Lord, glory to You!

Today glad tidings go forth to the whole world. Today sweet fragrance is wafted forth by the proclamation of salvation. Today is the end of the barrenness of our nature, for the barren one becomes a mother, the mother of the one who by nature will not cease to be a virgin, even after giving birth to the One who by nature is Creator and God. He it is who took from her His flesh by which He wrought salvation for the lost: He, the Christ, the Lover of Mankind and Savior of our souls! (Stichera at Vespers)

Adam is freed and Eve dances with joy. They say to you in spirit, O Mother of God, "In you we are delivered from the original curse by the coming of your Son!" (St Andrew of Crete, Canon, Ode 7)

O marvelous wonder! The source of Life is born from a barren woman; grace begins to grant its radiant fruit! Rejoice, O Joachim, who begot the Mother of God: there is no earthly father like you, O divinely inspired, for through you we have been given the Virgin who bore God, His divine tabernacle, His holy mountain. (Praises at Orthros)

Sunday before the Exaltation of the Precious Cross
Gal 6:11-18 – Jn 3:13-17

Circumcision and Baptism: Covenant Signs (Gal 6:11-18)

MANY PARISHES ARE PLAGUED by a mechanical celebration of the Liturgy and an equally mechanical reception of the Eucharist. Such abuses are nothing new. St Paul found that Christians in Corinth seemed unaware of the connection of the Eucharist to the saving passion and resurrection of Christ. He described how the Lord instituted the Eucharist (1 Cor 15: 23ff.), then warned against an unworthy reception of it.

St Paul prescribed that the Corinthians should prepare themselves for the Eucharist: "*Let a man examine himself and so let him eat*…" (v.28). Otherwise he would be guilty of "*not discerning the Lord's body*" (v. 29). The Corinthians' "rite of preparation" was to share the agape meal in a spirit of mutual love as a sign that the community was one in fact as well as in name. This was in the spirit of Christ's admonition, "*If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*" (Mt 5:23-24).

The Corinthians misunderstood what this practice was supposed to mean. Instead of sharing the fruits of the earth to prepare for sharing the Heavenly Bread, the meal became a sign of exclusion – "This is *my* steak – you eat your jerky" – rather than of mutual love.

In our Byzantine Liturgy mutual love is also a precondition for the celebration of the Eucharist. In the rite of peace before the anaphora the deacon proclaims "Let us love one another so that with one mind we may confess…" Also like the Corinthians we often miss the point of this rite. We say the words but do not act on them.

Over the centuries other practices have come to be associated with a worthy reception of the Eucharist in the apostolic Churches:

- *Repentance and Confession*: dealing with our sinfulness prepares us to experience the saving presence of Christ in the Divine Liturgy.
- *Fasting*: affirming that we are called to live "*not by bread alone*" (Mt 4:4) heightens our awareness that Christ is our true spiritual food. Traditionally we fast from midnight before a morning Liturgy and several hours before an evening celebration.
- *The Service of Preparation*: a canon of preparation is often read the night before receiving Communion. The service of preparation in the morning helps us focus on what will be the highpoint of our day.

All these practices aim at reminding us of what the Eucharist really means: union with Christ in His Body, the Church.

Taking a Stand (Gal 6:11-18)

"*As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ*" (Gal 6:12).

WE KNOW FROM SEVERAL of his epistles how adamant St. Paul was against obliging Christians to keep the prescriptions of the Torah – circumcision, the dietary rules and the like. In the Epistle to the Galatians we see one reason why some new Christians proposed keeping them: they wanted to fit in with the Jewish community in order to avoid persecution.

First persecutors of this new community, the followers of Jesus, were Jews. Paul himself had been one of the most dedicated. The Acts of the Apostles describes his zeal in combating them. "*Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem*" (Acts 9:1). By being circumcised, keeping the Torah rules and not mingling with Gentiles, some Jewish followers of Jesus felt that the opposition of the more fervent Jews would be muted.

St Paul approached the issue from the other side. The message of the Gospel was that neither the Torah nor the Temple saved; only faith in the Lord Jesus. If believers in Jesus continued to observe these Jewish practices, he argued, it is the Gospel message which would be muffled. People would no longer see Christ as "*the Way, the Truth and the Life*" (Jn 14:6), the only way to the Father. The unique saving role of Christ in God's plan would be forgotten.

The Practice of Fitting In

Christians throughout the history of the Church have found themselves is situations where they were eyed with distaste. Christians were considered outsiders at best or traitors at worst if they did not conform to the religious or ethical practices of the majority. The choice believers had in such cases has always been either to confront the majority by upholding their faith in Christ, to adopt the religion of the majority or to attempt a compromise: to keep their faith privately while seemingly observing non-Christian practices.

For the first three centuries of Christianity (the Roman era) Christians were suspected of superstitious practices corroding the fabric of the empire. They refused to take part in the state ceremonies honoring the gods and held secret rites behind closed doors. Their neglect of the ancient gods, many believed, would bring disaster on the empire.

When confronted, some Christians resisted and upheld their faith. They are revered today as martyrs or confessors. Others renounced their faith, offering sacrifices to the Roman gods or burning incense before their statues. Still others found ways of seeming to fit in. Some signed certificates stating that they honored the gods. In one such document which survived the author says, "I have always continued to sacrifice and show reverence to the gods; and now in your presence I have poured a libation and sacrificed, eating some of the sacrificial meat. I request you to certify this for me…" Often no sacrifices were actually offered; such documents were simply bought by bribing the officials. Other Christians went into hiding until the danger passed.

When the first empire-wide persecution of Christians came to an end in 260, many of those who had sacrificed or bought certificates returned to the Church. Christians did not agree on whether or how they should be received. Most Churches received these people back but with varying penalties. In some places those who had actually offered sacrifices were received as penitents who would only receive absolution and Communion on their deathbeds. Those who had obtained certificates without actually offering sacrifices were to remain as penitents for two years. Those who had betrayed other believers or who had handed over the Church's Scriptures or holy vessels to be destroyed received additional penances before being readmitted to Communion.

Crypto-Christians

In the Middle East and throughout the Ottoman Empire communities of "Crypto" or "Hidden" Christians arose. These people seemingly converted to Islam while adhering to Christian practices in secret. Many of these communities survived until the dawn of the modern era. There are reportedly still Crypto-Armenian Christians in Turkey and Crypto-Christian groups of Greeks, Latins, and Maronites in Turkish-dominated parts of Cyprus.

Perhaps the most famous Crypto-Christians are the *Kakure Kirishitan* of Japan who found ways of adapting and concealing their faith during persecutions in the seventeenth century. Images of Christ and the saints were transformed to look like Buddhist figures and prayers were adapted to sound like Buddhist chants. Some 30,000 of these secret Christians emerged in the nineteenth century when religious freedom was restored. Most renounced any syncretistic practices and rejoined the Catholic Church.

Fitting-In in a Secular Age

In our society conflicts with other recognized religions such as Buddhism are nowhere near as common as conflicts with the value-free lifestyles promoted by many in our secular society. Most people recognize that the historic Churches oppose abortion and have done so since the first century. Other sanctity of life issues such as euthanasia and the profit-driven restrictions on treatment of some managed care systems demand similar choices. Nurses, technicians and other

medical personnel may be faced with choices comparable to those described above. Do they refuse to participate in immoral activities and risk losing their jobs or do they commit the sin their employers demand?

Observers see a number of areas in modern life in addition to health care presenting similar conflicts, among them:

Education – Activists pressure schools to endorse homosexuality, same-sex marriage or sexual permissiveness in their curricula and student activities. Must Christian teachers choose between going along or losing their jobs? Must Christian parents sacrifice to send their children to private schools or to homeschool them rather than leave them where such views are considered "normal?"

Politics – Catholics and Orthodox in politics must daily choose between accepting the agendas of their donors and constituents or following the Gospel. As a rule such demands are not made publicly in this country but this is not true elsewhere. In May, 2014 Canada's Liberal Party leader, Justin Trudeau stated, "I have made it clear that future candidates need to be completely understanding [sic] that they will be expected to vote pro-choice on any bills."

The Tradition on Abortion

First and second century documents show that abortion has never been acceptable in the Church.

Speaking of what distinguishes Christians from pagans: "They marry, as do all others; they beget children but they do not cast away fetuses" (From the *Letter to Diognetus*).

"You shall not slay the child by abortions" **(**From the *Didache*).

"You shall not destroy your conceptions before they are brought forth; nor kill them after they are born" **(**From the *Letter of Barnabas*)

"Those who use abortifacients commit homicide**" (**From the *Epistle of St. Clement*).

The New Creation

"*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision avails anything, but a new creation*" (Galatians 6:15**)**.

As St. Paul was fond of pointing out, he had been raised as an observant and committed Pharisee, devoted to the observance of the Law. Yet he came to believe that the Law had served its purpose: to prepare the way for the life in Christ. The Law set forth a way of life for Israel that would be pleasing to God, in contrast to the ways of the pagan nations around them. It also showed that fallen man was unable to perfectly observe this Law. It would be for Another to reveal in His life, death and resurrection the goodness and mercy of God His Father.

The Law – epitomized by its first precept, circumcision – served to divide Jews from Gentiles in the eyes of its adherents. In their view Jews, recipients of the Law, were godly; Gentiles outside the Law were impure. In Christ, St Paul insisted, that division no longer matters. Jews and Gentiles who united themselves to Christ were now one in Him, a new creation. As he wrote to the Corinthians, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*" (2 Cor 15:17).

This new creation was accomplished when a person – Jew or Gentile – believed in Christ and was baptized. He was recreated as a person in communion with God through Christ and in communion with Christ's Body, the Church. His identity was no longer based on race, ethnicity or class, but on the newness of life in Christ.

Communion, Not Separation

St Paul's conviction that anyone could become this new creation in Christ by faith led him to see unity rather than separation as the paramount sign of holiness. As Christ has brought God and humanity together by His cross, so too He made it possible for His people to transcend any divisions of race, ethnicity or any human limitations.

As St Paul brought the Gospel to the great centers of the Roman Empire he preached Christ's work as a "*ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Cor 5: 18) between God and all mankind. Tradesmen, military commanders, patricians and slaves all came to be united to God in Christ in one baptism to share in the one Eucharist. When, as in Corinth, new Christians assumed their distinctions of class and wealth still applied, St Paul was quick to correct them. *"D*o *you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?"* (1 Cor 11:22) he wrote to those who accorded preferential treatment to the well-to-do.

Communion, Not Inclusiveness

While St Paul fought to include Gentiles as well as believing Jews in the Church, he did insist on one criterion of separation: the members of the Church were to follow the Gospel way of life rather than the godless practices of the wider society. Paul quotes the Law and the prophets in favor of separating, not Jews from Gentiles but unbelievers from believers: "*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you'"* (2 Cor 6:14-18).

So even in the first century AD the Church distinguished between those who followed the Gospel way of life vs. those who followed the way of the unbelieving society in which they lived. The first-century instruction manual called *The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles* (The Didache) shows what the first Christians saw to be godless behavior in the wider society: "The second commandment of the Teaching is Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not corrupt boys;

do not fornicate; do not steal; do not practice magic; do not go in for sorcery; do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant. Do not covet your neighbor's property; do not commit perjury; do not bear false witness; do not slander; do not bear grudges. Do not be double-minded or double-tongued, for a double tongue is a deadly snare. Your words shall not be dishonest or hollow, but substantiated by action. Do not be greedy or extortionate or hypocritical or malicious or arrogant. Do not plot against your neighbor. Do not hate anybody; but reprove some, pray for others, and love still others more than your own life."

As Gentiles became more numerous in the Churches there was less need to defend their participation in the face of a Jewish majority. The Fathers would insist on not imitating the lifestyle of the godless, but on imitating Christ. Instructing newly baptized believers St John Chrysostom said:

"I exhort you – both you who have previously been initiated and you who have just now enjoyed the Master's generosity – let us all listen to the exhortation of the apostle who tells us, '*The former things have passed away; behold, they are all made new*.' Let us forget the whole past, and like citizens in a new world, let us reform our lives and let us consider in our every word and deed the dignity of Him who dwells within us" (*Baptismal Catechesis* 4,16).

The New Creation in Our Baptisms

As the Church structured its baptismal rites, it expressed this same dynamic in the ceremony of accepting a catechumen. Before the candidate is asked to profess the Christian faith in the Nicene Creed, he or she is told to face the West (i.e. the world outside) and is asked repeatedly to distance himself from that world which is controlled by "*the rulers of the darkness of this age*" (Ephesians 6:12):

Priest: Do you renounce Satan, all his works, all his angels, all his services, and all his pride? (*Three times*)
Priest: Have you renounced Satan? (*Three times*)
Priest: Then blow on Satan and spit upon him!
Only then is the candidate asked:
Priest: Do you unite yourself to Christ? (*Three times*)
Priest: Have you united yourself to Christ?
Priest: Do you believe in Christ?
Person: Yes, I believe in Him as King and God.

The Didache and other early texts refused to minimize the difference between the new creation and the ways of a broken world: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways" (*Didache* 1, 1). Today many people, including some religious leaders, are trying to deny this "great difference." They seek to accommodate those with worldly lifestyles in what they call a "welcoming church" without asking them to make a choice between this age and the new creation. They sanitize what the early Church called a way of death, using terms like "choice," "reproductive rights," or "bringing the Church into the modern age." The new creation, however, requires what St John Chrysostom called "A new and heavenly rule of life" (*Homily on Galatians*, 6); otherwise it is not new at all.

"Observe the power of the Cross, to what a pitch it has raised [Paul]! Not only has it put to death for him all mundane affairs, but has set him far above the Old Dispensation.

"What can be comparable to this power? For the Cross has persuaded him, who was willing to be slain and to slay others for the sake of circumcision, to leave it on a level with uncircumcision, and to seek for things strange and marvelous and above the heavens.

"He calls this, our rule of life, a 'new creature,' both on account of what is past, and of what is to come. Our soul, which had grown old with the oldness of sin, was all at once renewed by baptism, as if it had been created again. Wherefore we require a new and heavenly rule of life. But the Christian life also points to things to come, because both the heaven and the earth, and all the creation, shall with our bodies be translated into incorruption.

"Do not talk to me then, he says, of circumcision, which now avails nothing; (for how shall it appear, when all things have undergone such a change?) but seek the new things of grace. For they who pursue these things shall enjoy peace and amity, and may properly be called by the name of Israel. While they who hold contrary sentiments, although they be descended from [Israel] and bear his name, have yet fallen away from all these things, both the relationship and the name itself. But it is in their power to be true Israelites, by keeping this rule: desist from the old ways, and follow after grace." (St John Chrysostom, *Homily on Galatians* 6)

The Tree of true life was planted in the Place of the Skull; and upon it, You, the eternal King, worked salvation in the midst of the earth. Exalted today, it sanctifies the ends of the earth, and the Church is renewed in the Resurrection. Angels in Heaven greatly rejoice and men upon earth make glad, crying aloud with David and saying, "Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His footstool, for He is holy, granting the world great mercy!"

Liti, September 14

Through the Cross, O Lord, today You have raised us up again. We were plunged continually in the gloom of our father Adam. Unrestrained greed thrust down our nature into error; but now we have been restored to our full inheritance by the light of the Cross which we, the faithful, magnify.

Ninth Ode, September 14

The Brazen Serpent (Jn 3:14)

WHEN PEOPLE THINK OF SNAKES and the Bible, the first thing they may recall is the serpent in the Book of Genesis. There this creature is described as "*more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made*" (Gen 3:1). It personifies the Tempter who causes Eve and then her husband to fall.

In response to the temptation of Eve, God punishes the serpent: *"Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you*

shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life" (Gen 3:13). The snake or serpent then becomes the image of all that is evil.

Throughout the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms we find many negative references to snakes. Thus the prophet Micah compares the enemies of Judea to snakes who conceal themselves and then emerge when it is time to strike: "*They shall lick the dust like a serpent; they shall crawl from their holes like snakes of the earth*" (Mi 7:17). Not a very flattering image for anyone who likes snakes.

Why, then, do we find the Lord Jesus comparing Himself to a snake: "*…as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up*"? (Jn 3:14) What is so different about this snake that makes it a fitting image for the Son of Man?

The Serpent in the Wilderness

The reference to Moses lifting up a serpent takes us back to the story of the Israelites' exodus from captivity in Egypt. In the Book of Numbers we read that the Israelites made their way through the wilderness of Sinai into the Promised Land but were not welcomed by the local inhabitants. They were under God's protection and were given the manna for their daily food but they were not satisfied. Many felt that they had been better off as slaves in Egypt.

"Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.' So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died."

The "fiery serpents" refers to a species of poisonous snakes whose bite inflames the affected area. The Israelites seem to have stumbled upon a place where such snakes were common. The Israelites interpreted the serpent or snake as a sign of evil: of fatal punishment to God's People who doubted His care for them.

"Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people.

"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a brazen serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived" (Num 21:4-9).

The Israelites appear to have taken the bronze serpent with them and enshrined it as a memorial to their deliverance in the wilderness, much as they preserved a jar of manna in the Tabernacle. According to Jewish tradition, the bronze serpent was too much like an idol; hundreds of years later it seems that some of the Israelites were venerating it as their deliverer rather than God. King Hezekiah of Judah, who reigned from 715 to 686 BC, destroyed the bronze serpent for just that reason: "*He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden*

image [to Asherah, a Canaanite goddess] *and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan*" (2 Kgs 18:4).

The Bronze Serpent as a "Type"

The Lord is quoted in John's Gospel as describing the bronze serpent incident as a type of Himself. A *type* is a person or event from an earlier era which pre-figures Christ, His Church, the holy mysteries or any aspect of the New Covenant. The sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22, Heb 11:17-19), the deliverance of Jonah (Book of Jonah, Mt 12:39-40), the Israelites' departure from Egypt (Hosea 11:1, Mt 2:15), the water from the rock (Ex 17:1-7, 1 Cor 10:1-4) are all types cited in the New Testament itself as fulfilled in Christ. In our worship Passover, the celebration of the Exodus, is a type of the New Passover, the resurrection. The Feast of Weeks, 50 days after Passover, is a type of Pentecost, 50 days after the New Passover.

In John the words "lifted up" are used twice to describe the type and its fulfillment. The type in this case is not the bronze serpent, which had no power in itself, but the act of displaying it in the sight of the Israelites. This type is fulfilled when Christ is "lifted up," put on display at His crucifixion.

In John's Gospel the account of Christ's passion repeatedly shows Christ "lifted up" before the gaze of those around Him. After he had Jesus beaten and crowned with thorns, "*Pilate then went out again, and said to them, 'Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him.' Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, 'Behold the Man!' When the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, 'Crucify Him, crucify Him!*'" (Jn 19:4-6).

After Jesus dies, the soldiers come to hasten the death of those crucified that day. They broke the legs of the criminals crucified with Him. Seeing that He was already dead, they merely pierced His side. John notes that "*All these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, 'Not one of His bones shall be broken.' And again another Scripture says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced'"* (Jn 19:36-37). The type is fulfilled as Jesus is lifted up, beheld and looked upon.

In the Old Testament the Israelites who looked on it with faith in God's purposes for them received healing of the venom caused by their sin. In the same way those who fix their attention on Christ receive healing for the sickness caused by the sin of the world.

Two Further "Liftings"

On September 14 the Church remembers two other occasions when Christ was "lifted up": the Exaltations of the Holy Cross. The feast recalls the finding of the cross in the fourth century by St Helena and the recapture of the cross from Persian invaders by Emperor Heraclius in the seventh century. A highlight of the feast is the lifting up of the cross in blessing over the world while "Lord, have mercy" is repeatedly sung. We are invited to fix our attention on Christ who was lifted upon the cross for us.

The cross, like the Eucharist, is an *antitype* of Christ. While a type is something in the past that is fulfilled in the future, an antitype is something in the present that connects us to the climactic events of our salvation. As we look upon the cross lifted up on this feast we see, as the Israelites did before us, both our sin which brought about Christ's suffering and His victory which brings about our healing.

Prefiguring you, the most precious Cross, Moses lifted a brazen serpent up high on a pole to oppose the fiery serpents, as it is written. By you we are delivered from the deception of the spiritual serpents. *Canon of the Forefeast*

September 13 – Dedication of the Anastasis in Jerusalem

OF ALL THE SHRINES and cathedrals throughout the Christian world there is nothing to equal the *Anastasis*, the Church of the Resurrection, in Jerusalem, known in the West as the Holy Sepulchre. The church complex includes the hill of Calvary, the place of Christ's death, and the tomb in which He was buried and from which He rose on the third day. Its dedication on September 13, 335 is remembered every year on this date on the Byzantine calendar.

While the present form of the Anastasis dates from the mid-nineteenth century, its origins may be found at the beginning of the Christian Roman Empire, with the Equals to the Apostles, Ss Constantine and Helen. During the Roman persecution of Christians, a pagan temple had been built on the site to bury the memory of Christ's tomb. The first Christian emperor, St Constantine, mounted an expedition, led by his mother St Helena, to restore and adorn the places associated with Christ's life. The pagan temple was demolished and the Anastasis built on the site of Calvary and the tomb.

The Anastasis is actually a complex of chapels and churches with the tomb of Christ at its center. According to the Gospel, "*Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb ... hewn out of the rock*" (Jn 19:41; Mt 27:60). The rock and earth around the tomb was removed and a *kouvouklion* or shrine built around it. Over the centuries it has been adorned with marble, hanging lamps, icons and other ornaments so that it bears little resemblance to the garden tomb in which Jesus was laid. The site, however, had been cherished by local Christians long before Constantine as the actual places where the Lord suffered His Passion.

A rotunda, or circular enclosure, was built around the tomb to accommodate worshippers. At first it was open to the sky, but by the end of the fourth century a dome was constructed, enclosing the entire area.

Besides the tomb of Christ the Anastasis also contained a great basilica, called the *martyrion*, and a covered atrium over the rock of Calvary. These three separate structures were joined together in later years and several more chapels added, giving us the form we know today.

Surviving the Centuries

The Anastasis survived centuries of natural disasters as well as invasion and occupation by hostile forces. The church was almost destroyed by a fire in 614 during the Persian occupation of Jerusalem but restored after the Persians were driven out in 630. During Arab rule, the church was damaged and then completely destroyed in AD 1009 by the so-called "Mad Caliph," al-Hakim. The shrine enclosing the tomb was buried in rubble which protected it from further damage.

Rebuilding the Anastasis was negotiated in a peace treaty between the Arabs and the Byzantine Empire. It took twenty years of work to rebuild the church. Several small chapels surrounding the principal shrines were added at that time. The Anastasis was often damaged and restored in centuries that followed. The most extensive damage resulted from a fire in 1808. The great dome collapsed, damaging the kouvouklion somewhat. Two earthquakes in the 1830s caused further damage. The reconstruction that followed was completed in 1870. Further restoration was needed after an earthquake in 1927 and extensive repairs were begun in 1958 and are still continuing.

The Anastasis Today

The number of Christian groups seeking use of the church caused frequent squabbles until 1852, when the Ottomans decreed an arrangement called the *status quo* which is still in force. It placed the administration of the church in the hands of the three oldest and largest Christian groups in Jerusalem, the Armenian, Greek and Latin Churches. The Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox Churches also have certain sections allotted to their use. The Greek Catholic patriarchate is nearby, but is not part of the Anastasis complex.

Entrance to the Anastasis is through an open courtyard flanked by a Roman Catholic chapel to Our Lady of Sorrows and a Greek Orthodox chapel of St Mary the Egyptian who experienced her conversion at the door of the Anastasis. A Greek Orthodox monastery, the Gethsemane Metochion, is also accessed from this courtyard.

The rotunda enclosing the Lord's tomb occupies approximately one-third of the church's main floor. Each day three Liturgies (Armenian, Greek and Latin) are offered in the tomb. The rotunda also contains a Coptic Orthodox chapel and a Syriac Orthodox. Five smaller chapels face the kouvouklion from the north and south.

Opposite the rotunda is the catholicon or cathedral of the Greek Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Greek and Armenian chapels line the aisle in the apse of the catholicon.

Descending a staircase brings us to three more chapels, Armenian, Greek, and Latin respectively. Ascending another staircase leads us to the Golgotha, shrine of the crucifixion. The Greek and Latin chapels here recall the death of Christ.

The "Garden Tomb"

American and European Protestants began coming to Jerusalem in the nineteenth century but did not feel comfortable with Eastern liturgy or the ornamentation of the holy sites. The ornamentation of the tomb, however, had begun as soon as the Anastasis was constructed. The

pilgrim-nun Egeria saw it this way: "You see there nothing but gold and gems and silk. For if you look at the veils, they are wholly made of silk striped with gold, and if you look at the curtains they too are made wholly of silk striped with gold… And what shall I say of the decoration of the building itself which Constantine – at his mother's instigation – decorated with gold, mosaic and costly marbles, as far as the resources of his kingdom allowed him…"

Some Protestant writers, believing that Jerusalem in the first century was the same size as the present city, derided the Anastasis as "mere delusion, a monkish juggle" (Edward Clarke, 1812). British theorists proposed another site, outside the present city, "Gordon's Calvary" as the place of Christ's death and burial. The unadorned "Garden Tomb" developed there is the favored location for Protestant worship, although it is now realized that the site of the Anastasis was outside the city walls in Christ's day.

Egeria's Pilgrimage

In about 380 a Spanish nun visited the Holy Places. She described Sunday worship at the Anastasis as moving from the courtyard to the tomb, then to the Cross and the basilica:

"On the seventh day, that is, on the Lord's Day, the whole multitude assembles before cockcrow … in the basilica which is near the Anastasis, but outside the doors… As soon as the first cock has crowed, the bishop arrives and enters the cave at the Anastasis; all the doors are opened and the whole multitude enters the Anastasis where countless lamps are already lit… After three psalms and three prayers are ended, censers are brought into the cave of the Anastasis so that the whole basilica of the Anastasis is filled with odors. And then the bishop, standing within the rails, takes the book of the Gospel, and proceeding to the door, himself reads the Resurrection (narrative) … After the reading of the Gospel the bishop goes out to the Cross, accompanied by all the people with hymns. There again a psalm is said and prayer is made, after which he blesses the faithful and the dismissal takes place… At daybreak because it is the Lord's Day, everyone proceeds to the greater church, built by Constantine, which is situated in Golgotha behind the Cross, where all things are done which are customary everywhere on the Lord's Day …

September 14 – Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross

1 Cor 1:18-24 – Jn 19: 6, 11, 13, 20, 25-33

Expiation for the World

THE GREAT FEASTS OF THE CHURCH are each celebrations of an aspect of the mystery of Christ: Of these feasts Pascha is considered "the Feast of Feasts," the center of our Church life, the mystery of Christ's resurrection. While Pascha is celebrated with feasting, the Great and Holy Week which leads up to Pascha observes the last events of Christ's earthly life, His death and burial with fasting.

Each Sunday celebrates the resurrection with the Eucharistic banquet while each Wednesday and Friday remember Christ's betrayal and death – again, with fasting.

Next in importance to Pascha are "the Twelve Great Feasts" which celebrate events of Christ's life, of His Mother, of His ascension and the coming of the Spirit. Several of these are preceded by days or seasons of fasting. The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is the only one observed by simultaneous feasting and fasting!

Our Reasons for Feasting

The immediate historical events celebrated on this feast are, first of all, the unearthing of the Cross in the fourth century during the expedition led by St Helena to adorn the Holy Land with fitting shrines to Christ. The second event remembered is the recovery of the cross in the seventh century by Byzantine forces fourteen years after it had been captured by Persian invaders.

Two traditions common among Eastern Christians celebrate the discovery of the cross. It is said that St. Helena's workmen were led to the site of the cross by the fragrant aroma of basil growing there. It is customary to adorn the cross and, in some places, the entire church with sprigs of basil. Some basil would be given to people when they venerate the Cross to take home and adorn their icons. In some parts of Greece basil would be ground and added to the dough used to make prosphora.

A second festive act observed throughout the Middle East in both Byzantine and Oriental Churches is the lighting of bonfires, usually after the vespers or vigil of the feast. When the cross was unearthed by St. Helena's expedition, the news of this discovery was spread from Jerusalem to Constantinople by a series of bonfires set on the mountains along the coast through Asia Minor. Today's bonfires are a popular re-enactment of that event.

The recovery of the Cross is remembered by another festive act – the one which gives this feast its name. When the victorious Byzantine army returned the Cross to Jerusalem, Patriarch Zachariah "exalted" the Cross, lifting it high for the veneration of the people who continually cried out *Kyrie eleison* as they gazed on the Cross. In our ceremony of the exaltation, the Cross is raised high in each direction – north, south, east and west – to bless the entire world as the people repeatedly chant *Kyrie eleison.*

Our most basic reason for feasting on this day, however, is what took place on the Cross. As St. John Chrysostom described it, "The Cross has taken away sin. It was an expiation for the world, a reconciliation of the ancient enmity. It opened the gates of heaven, changed those who hated into friends; it took our human nature, led it up to heaven, and seated it at the right hand of God's throne. And it brought to us ten thousand other blessings" (*Homily 3 against the Judaizers*).

The first sticheron sung at vespers on this feast echoes this festive sentiment:

"By its elevation, the Cross is like an appeal to the whole creation to adore the blessed Passion of Christ our God who was suspended on it, for Christ destroyed by this Cross the one who had destroyed us. In His great goodness, He brought us back to life after we had been dead, and He beatified us and made us worthy of Heaven, for He is merciful. Wherefore, we exalt His name with great rejoicing and glorify His infinite condescension."

Our Reason for Fasting

We also observe the feast of the Cross by fasting – not in anticipation of the feast but on the feast itself. Church directives say that September 14 is a strict fast day, on whatever day of the week it falls. So we may be called upon to fast on Saturday or even on Sunday. The fast is mitigated on weekends (wine and oil are permitted) but not completely abolished. Since Sunday is always a Eucharistic day, today's fast means that we do not eat until we receive Holy Communion. After that, we do not eat meat, fish or dairy products.

The Church's reason for fasting on this day is not to lament the death of Christ, which as we have seen is a source of blessings. Rather we fast because of our sins, committed despite the fact that we know what Christ has done for us on the cross and still prefer to follow our own egos rather than following His way. We do well to be distressed when we look on the Cross – not for the Lord's sake (He is risen!) – but because our salvation, brought about on the Cross, means so little to us.

The mention of fasting usually prompts two reactions. Some overly meticulous people tend to overemphasize fasting rules in a legalistic way. Others, imbued with a pietistic ideas about devotion, see fasting and any discipline involving the body, such as prostrations, kissing icons, etc. as unspiritual.

St Paul would not agree. He definitely saw that the body becomes an important component in worship when we use it in a sacrificial way. "*I beseech you therefore, brethren,*" he wrote, "*by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service*" (Romans 12:1). When we refrain from food and drink, from sleep, from sexual activity or from any normal physical activity we make our longing an offering to God. In this way we push the physical beyond itself into the spiritual realm. Our physical desires become a *logike latreia,* a reasoned or conscious act of worship of the One who has given us all things.

"The Lord accomplished our salvation by His death on the Cross: on the Cross He tore up the handwriting of our sins; through the Cross He reconciled us with our God and Father; and through the Cross He brought down upon us grace-filled gifts and all heavenly blessings. But this is the Lord's Cross itself. Each of us becomes a partaker of its salvific power in no other way than through our personal cross.

"When the personal cross of each of us is united with Christ's Cross, the power and effect of the latter is transferred to us and becomes, as it were, a conduit through which '*every good gift and every perfect grace*' (James 1:17) is poured forth upon us from the Cross of Christ.

"From this it is evident that the personal cross of each of us is as essential to the work of salvation as the Cross of Christ."

St Theophan the Recluse

Glory to Your Precious Cross!

IN MARCH, 2012 THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT sided with employers who refused to allow Christians to wear a visible cross at work. Wearing a cross is not a requirement of Christianity, the spokesman affirmed, so wearing one in public is not protected by the law.

In October, 312 government took a very different position. Inspired in a dream to mark his soldiers' shields with the cross, the Roman officer Constantine went on to win control of the empire, an act he attributed to the help of the Christian God. Within a few years reverence for the cross had become the universal mark of Christians in the empire. St John Chrysostom, writing later in the same century, would note how "Kings, removing their diadems, take up the cross, the symbol of their Savior's death; on the purple – the cross; in their prayers – the cross; on their armor – the cross; on the holy table – the cross; throughout the universe –the cross. The cross shines brighter than the sun."

Jerusalem, City of the Cross

Beginning about the year 325 the Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena began to uncover and adorn the sites associated with the life of Christ. In 333 the Church of the Nativity was dedicated in Bethlehem and in September 13, 335 the Church of the Resurrection, built to enclose the tomb of the Lord, was dedicated. The site, revered by Jerusalem's Christians, had been covered over in AD 135 when a previous emperor, Hadrian, order a temple to Aphrodite built there as part of his attempt to remake Jerusalem into a Roman city. Constantine had the temple destroyed and the surrounding area cut away to make the tomb and the mount of Golgotha more prominent. A covered atrium was built to enclose these two shrines which was then joined to an adjoining basilica and covered by a single domed roof.

By restoring the biblical character of the Holy Land, the Roman emperor Constantine undid the work of his predecessor Hadrian and also of the emperor Tiberius, under whom Christ was crucified, and the emperors of the previous two centuries who tried to destroy His Body, the Church.

The Century of the Cross

During the excavations conducted for the construction of the church, workers unearthed the cross of Christ and the title placed over his head. A portion of the cross was sent to the emperor in Constantinople, but the principal part was enclosed in silver and entrusted to the care of the Bishop of Jerusalem. As a result Christians throughout the empire dreamed of visiting the Lord's tomb and venerating the precious and life-giving cross of Christ which was enshrined there. A few years after the church's dedication, St Cyril of Jerusalem could actually point to the cross as tangible proof that Christ was truly crucified. "Jesus then really suffered for all men; for the Cross was no illusion, otherwise our redemption is an illusion also. His death was not a mere show, for then is our salvation also fabulous. …If I should now deny it, here is Golgotha to refute me, near which we are now assembled; the wood of the Cross itself refutes me, which was afterwards distributed piecemeal from hence to all the world" (Catechetical Lecture 13.4).

On May 7, 351 another manifestation of the cross took place over Jerusalem. The current bishop, St Cyril of Jerusalem, reported that a large cross encircled by a rainbow appeared in the heavens, just over the holy Golgotha, reaching as far as the holy mount of Olivet, (almost two miles). He affirmed that it was seen not by one or two persons, but clearly and evidently by the whole city and remained visible for several hours.

In c. 381-384 the Spanish pilgrim nun Egeria visited Jerusalem. She described the veneration of the Holy Cross on Good Friday, noting that the Cross and the title are removed from their reliquary and held by the bishop. Then "all the people pass by one by one, all bowing themselves, they touch the Cross and the title, first with their foreheads and then with their eyes; then they kiss the Cross and pass through, but none lays his hand upon it to touch it" (*Pilgrimage*, 37.3). Egeria also describes the week-long anniversary of the church's dedication each year; however much of what she wrote has been lost. The manuscript is incomplete.

Recovery of the Cross

One other event concerning the Cross is remembered at this time. The Roman Empire was often at odds with its neighbor to the east, the Sassanid Persians. When Rome was pagan, Christianity was welcomed in Persia, but when Rome became Christian the Persians turned against the Christians as Roman sympathizers. In AD 602 the Persian Sassanian Shah began a 26-year long war against the Byzantine/ Roman Empire. In AD 613 the Persians invaded. They sacked Jerusalem in 614 and appointed two prominent Jews as its rulers. After only a few months Christians in the city rebelled, but the uprising was quickly crushed. The Persians retaliated by seizing the holy cross and taking it to their capitol as spoils of war.

The Emperor Heraclius retaliated and in 627 surrounded the Persian capital. The next year, a new Shah made peace with the Byzantines. Palestine was returned to Roman control and on March 21, 630 the Emperor Heraclius marched triumphantly into Jerusalem bearing the precious cross. The Emperor, taking off his shoes and his imperial robes, carried the cross into the Anastasis where it was once again triumphantly exalted. It was then resolved that the Feast of the Cross be celebrated throughout the empire, for which reason it is called the Universal Exaltation.

The Cross Today

Christians in the fourth century clearly saw the power of the Cross in the events of their age as signs that the Roman Empire was meant to turn to Christ. Succeeding centuries saw the Cross become something of a talisman, carried or worn for personal protection. When Crusaders sacked Constantinople in 1204 they divided up the emperor's portion of the Cross for bishops and princes throughout Europe. Subsequent ages saw Europe dismiss the Cross and even the Crucified as passé and irrelevant. The Cross remained only as an item of jewelry or other ornament but less and less as the sign of the true life of the world.

In Jerusalem Christ emptied Himself, even to death on the Cross. Today we see the Cross emptied of its imperial, political and talismanic associations – necessary perhaps for the true meaning of Christ's sacrifice to shine forth again in power. The radiance of the Crucified is in His refusal of power rather than in an embrace of it.

FROM THE FEASTS OF THE CROSS

The divine treasure hidden in the earth, the Cross of the life-giving Lord, appears in the sky to the pious emperor, showing him the spiritual sign for his victory over the enemy. With love, in joy and faith, he is divinely inspired to seek the exaltation of the object of his vision. He carefully has it lifted from the bosom of the earth for the redemption of the world and the salvation of our souls. (*Vespers of the Forefeast*)

By its elevation, the Cross is like an appeal to the whole creation to adore the blessed Passion of Christ our God who was suspended on it, for Christ destroyed by this Cross the one who had destroyed us. In His great goodness, He brought us back to life after we had been dead, and He beatified us and made us worthy of Heaven, for He is merciful. Wherefore, we exalt His name with great rejoicing and glorify His infinite condescension. (*Vespers of the Feast*)

The rod of Your divine power has appeared from on high: the Cross, sent to us in Sion, wholly illumined by grace and boundless light. The heavenly cross of our crucified God has shone forth above glorious Golgotha, proclaiming to all that salvation has come to the world through His sufferings. Bowing down before it we chant unceasingly and ask with faith that He grant peace to the world and that He save our souls. (*Vespers. May 7*)

The Elevation of the Precious Cross

MANY OF THE FEASTS we celebrate each year have a special rite connected with them. The Great Sanctification of Water on the Theophany, the *hajme* service on Pascha and the veneration of icons on the Sunday of Orthodoxy are perhaps the best-known examples of these festal observances.

There is also a special rite proper to the feast of the Exaltation of the Precious Cross (September 14) called, appropriately, the Exaltation of the Cross. During the Great Doxology at Orthros the cross, adorned with flowers and herbage is brought in procession to the center of the church where it is placed on a table or analogion. Everyone then makes three prostrations before the cross. After this, the priest raises the cross high and, facing East, intones a petition. The chanters

respond by singing *Lord, have mercy* one hundred times as the priest blesses the East with the holy cross. He does the same successively facing North, then West, then South, and then East again as he circles the table. He intones the kondakion of the Holy Cross and blesses the people. The cross is placed on the table and everyone makes three prostrations before it, singing "We bow in worship before Your cross, O Master, and we sing praise to Your holy resurrection." Then everyone in turn venerates the cross. In some churches, this rite of exaltation is performed after the Divine Liturgy.

Reenacting the Discovery of the Cross

This rite is a reenactment of something that happened spontaneously when the cross was first discovered at the excavation for the Church of the Anastasis during St Helena's expedition to the Holy Land in AD 326-328. The fourth-century Church historian Socrates Scholasticus described what took place in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

The site of Christ's death and resurrection had been covered over by a pagan temple during the Roman persecutions of the Church. St Helena had the temple destroyed to uncover the sacred site. Three crosses were discovered buried near the Lord's tomb. The title placed on the Lord's cross (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) was lying with the crosses but it was not clear on which of the three crosses the Lord had been crucified. The Bishop of Jerusalem, Makarios, had each of the crosses placed in turn on a terminally ill woman. When this woman was healed at the touch of the third cross, it was taken as a sign that this was the cross of Christ.

When local Christians heard of this discovery, they all wanted to see the Lord's cross and to venerate it. Bishop Makarios, took the cross onto a raised platform and lifted it on high, 'exalting' it, for all to see. The people fell to their knees, bowing down before the cross and crying out repeatedly: *Kyrie eleison*!

As Theodoret of Cyr (393-457) described it in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Chapter 17, St Helena "… had part of the cross of our Savior conveyed to the palace. The rest was enclosed in a covering of silver, and committed to the care of the bishop of the city, whom she exhorted to preserve it carefully, in order that it might be transmitted uninjured to posterity."

Veneration of the Cross

We know from the journal of the Spanish pilgrim-nun Egeria that the cross was venerated on Holy Friday, despite an unusual risk:

"Then a chair is placed for the bishop in Golgotha behind the [liturgical] Cross, which is now standing; the bishop duly takes his seat in the chair, and a table covered with a linen cloth is placed before him; the deacons stand round the table, and a silver-gilt casket is brought in which is the holy wood of the Cross. The casket is opened and [the wood] is taken out, and both the wood of the Cross and the title are placed upon the table. Now, when it has been put upon the table, the bishop, as he sits, holds the extremities of the sacred wood firmly in his hands, while the deacons who stand around guard it.

“It is guarded thus because the custom is that the people, both faithful and catechumens, come one by one and, bowing down at the table, kiss the sacred wood and pass through. And because, I know not when, someone is said to have bitten off and stolen a portion of the sacred wood, it is thus guarded by the deacons who stand around, lest anyone approaching should venture to do so again.

“And as all the people pass by one by one, all bowing themselves, they touch the Cross and the title, first with their foreheads and then with their eyes; then they kiss the Cross and pass through, but none lays his hand upon it to touch it. When they have kissed the Cross and have passed through, a deacon stands holding the ring of Solomon and the horn from which the kings were anointed; they kiss the horn also and gaze at the ring.”

All the Earth Glorifies the Cross

When St Helena found the crosses at the site of Christ’s tomb she noticed a fragrant plant, then unknown in Rome, which she named basil, the royal plant. In the Middle East, the cross is adorned with basil leaves at the ceremony of the exaltation. The basil is then distributed to the worshippers.

In the Slavic Churches, the ceremony of the exultation is generally performed only by the bishop in his cathedral or an abbot in his monastery. During the ceremony, the cross is often showered with rose petals which are then dipped in rose water and given to the faithful.

The Cross – Tree of Life

While the clergy and people are venerating the holy cross, the following is sung:

Come, you people, and look on this marvelous wonder! Let us venerate the power of the cross. In Paradise a tree brought forth the fruit of death, but life is the blossom of this tree on which the sinless Lord was nailed. Reaping incorruption from it, all the nations cry: “You, who through the cross has laid Death low and set us free – glory to You!”

The sayings of the prophets foretold the holy wood by which Adam was set free from the ancient curse of death. Today, at the exaltation of the cross, all creation raises its voice, asking of God plenteous mercy. O Master, who alone are boundless in Your compassion, be our atonement and save our souls.

Sunday during the Feast of the Precious Cross
Gal 2:16-20 – Mark 8:11-9:1

Confessing Our Faith through Works (Gal 2:16-20)

THE APOSTLES INVARIABLY BEGAN their preaching ministry in a foreign city at the Jewish synagogue. They sought to show both the Jews and the "God-fearing Gentiles" who worshipped with them that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the prophets. It was usually after forming a nucleus from among these believers that they approached other Gentiles.

This attempt to integrate Jews and Gentiles into one community of faith prompted the controversy over the place of circumcision and the works of the Law (the Torah) that recur again and again in the apostolic writings. The New Testament teaching, spearheaded by St Paul, is that these "works" – circumcision, sacrifices, etc. – do not save. Salvation is the work of Christ alone which we appropriate by faith.

In the Middle Ages, when entire nations in the West had become Christian, everyone was assumed to believe. Their verbal confession of faith – the Creed – was recited daily by everyone. Personal faith was stimulated less by words than by what was called "works of supererogation" – pilgrimages, prescribed prayers and devotions – going beyond what was necessary to obtain God's grace. Donations were often tied to these "works" in support of the shrines, churches or religious orders which promoted them. Though most of these practices were rooted in the mystery of Christ and His Church, it seemed to many that their power came from the "works" themselves. Reaction against this kind of spirituality was an important impetus of the Protestant Reformation.

Protestants, particularly among the "Free Churches" completely rejected spiritual "works" such as rituals, sacraments, images, or relics. Their worship services focused on prayer and preaching. To emphasize the need for interior faith, external expressions were discouraged and even forbidden.

This was not the teaching of the apostles who did not forbid the "works of the Law." They did not discourage their Jewish followers from observing them nor did they impose these practices on the non-Jewish believers. Only faith in Christ, rather than the observance of any practices, would save. External practices were useful if they expressed and stimulated faith; they simply could not replace it.

The New Testament itself attests to practices such as Baptism, the Eucharist, the Laying-on of Hands and the Lord's Day. Documents from the next generation of believers show their use of the sign of the cross and fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. Practices such as a cycle of daily services arose in all the local Churches. Other external expressions of faith arose over the centuries, sometimes in one Church or another. The value of any such practice for us is according to our faith in the Lord to whom they point.

Faith Expressed in Works

For centuries Christians in the historic or apostolic Churches of East and West proclaimed their faith publicly whenever possible through external works. They built shrines, erected crosses and images on their lands, placed icons on the outside of their homes and in their places of work. In our culture such practices are often carried out by recent immigrants, who will display images of their hometown patrons in their stores or the windows of their homes.

Our contemporary secular society discourages such expressions as inappropriate in the world outside the home or church. Religious expression, they say, should be private, especially as our society is equally for people of every religion and of none. By and large people have gone along with this viewpoint. Churches have gradually abandoned or minimized outdoor processions. Believers generally don't pray before meals in public places or express preferences for fasting foods on the appointed days when dining with others. We quietly agree to activities scheduled to conflict with the Sunday Liturgy. We rarely see icons in shops or restaurants, aside from some Greek-owned diners. When asked our religion we are likely to respond as did one Middle Eastern shopkeeper, "I am what you are."

Of late, however, secularists have become more aggressive in their drive to keep religion – and Christianity in particular? – out of the public sector. People have been disciplined, for example, and even fired for wearing a cross or religious medallion in the workplace. Some businesses demand that employees refrain from making any public statements anywhere that do not accord with company aims.

Believers in some places have challenged such policies and in some places won legal victories on constitutional grounds for the right to express their faith visibly in such ways. Perhaps these controversies can serve to remind us of the words of Christ in the Gospel, *"Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels"* (Mk 8:38).

Many of us can place an icon above the door of our home or a cross in our yard. Each of us can wear a cross or medal around our neck or in our lapel. We can share colored eggs at Pascha with our neighbors or blessed water, fruit and artoklasia bread on the appropriate feast days. Seeing how elaborately people decorate their homes to celebrate Halloween or welcome Santa, can believers not use palms, greens or banners to publicly observe the Gospel mystery?

Works such as these surely do not save, but they can wordlessly express our faith in Christ incarnate, crucified, risen and wondrous in His saints. They can simply but clearly affirm that we are not ashamed of the Son of Man, the Source of our life.

O Master, infinite in Your divine nature, You condescended in these latter days to become incarnate and finite: for in assuming our body, You accepted all its properties. Wherefore, we represent Your likeness and embrace it with the Model in mind. We go up to Your love, and,

following the divine tradition set by the Apostles, we draw from it the grace of healing. (*Stichon at the Lamplighting of Vespers, Sunday of Orthodoxy*)

O Lord, by exposing Your bodily image for veneration, we proclaim the great mystery of Your saving Economy. O Christ, You have manifested Yourself to our eyes, not by a mere apparition, as the Manicheans wrongfully believe, but in the reality of the flesh, whose nature leads us to love You. (*Stichon at the Praises of Matins, Sunday of Orthodoxy*)

When God Works in Us

POLITICIANS ARE OFTEN ACCUSED of committing doublespeak: contradicting themselves as occasion demands. St Paul seems to do the same thing in his teaching on justification. He seems to contradict himself in teaching how we are justified. On one occasion he teaches that we are justified by faith; on another occasion he encourages people to work out their salvation. Is this doublespeak or do these teachings complement each other?

Faith over Works

In Gal 2:16 St Paul writes, "… *knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; for by the works of the Law no flesh shall be justified*." The term "works of the Law" refers to regulations prescribed in the Torah which were the subject of debate by first-century Jews of different schools. Opinions of the Qumran school came to light in the twentieth century with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of these documents, *Some Pertinent Works of Torah*, illustrates the enormous preoccupation on the part of many first-century Jews with these regulations.

When St Paul says that no one is justified by works of the Law, he seems to be referring to the ceremonial regulations which were so important to contemporary Jews: the dietary laws, the Sabbath and holyday observances, and especially circumcision, which was deemed essential for numbering a man into the People of God.

In St Paul's day most Christians were, in fact, Jews who had come to accept the Lord Jesus as the Messiah. Some of them were insisting on the necessity of circumcision if a Gentile were to be admitted into the Church. St Paul opposed them and pointed out earlier in Galatians that his practice was not rejected even in Jerusalem.

In Gal 2 he tells of visiting the Holy City with Barnabas and Titus: "*After fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me… Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised*" (Gal 2:1, 3). St Paul says that the chief apostles, Peter, James and John supported his outreach to the Gentiles and "*desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do*" (v. 10).

The issue was far from settled, however. Peter reversed his view at a later time. "*Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew*

and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy" (vv. 11-13).

Paul's position would eventually be upheld when the issue was discussed in Jerusalem (see Acts 15). The apostles then sent this letter with their decision: "*The apostles, the elders, and the brethren to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law'—to whom we gave no such commandment— ... it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell*" (Acts 15:23-29).

The apostles thus freed Gentiles from observing circumcision and most of the Jewish dietary regulations. The other prohibitions continued to be observed in the East for centuries, enshrined in the Apostolic Canons. This collection, chiefly of Syrian origin, was accepted as binding throughout the East by the seventh-century Trullan Council. Its sixty-third canon reads in part, "If any Bishop, or Presbyter, or Deacon, or anyone else on the sacerdotal list at all, eat meat in the blood of its soul, or that has been killed by a wild beast, or that has died a natural death, let him be deposed. For the Law has forbidden this."

This prohibition is based on the idea, common in the ancient world, that blood carries the essence of the soul. By consuming the blood of an animal we make a part of ourselves the passionate nature of the animal just as we partake of Christ's nature by receiving the Eucharist. Properly slaughtered meat would not have substantial quantities of blood, unlike the other cases mentioned in the canon.

Paul himself continued to observe many ceremonial works of the Law but did not see any of them as a cause of our justification. Christ, he insisted, is the only way to God and it is only through faith in Him that we can attain union with the Father.

The Call to Work

It seems contradictory that the same Paul who was so adamant against being justified by the works of the Law would later tell the Philippians, "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*" (Phil 2:12-13).

For St Paul justification is not a one-time event in life. We do not simply say a prayer or make our baptismal vows once and that does it! Salvation, or justification (to use St Paul's term) comes through faith, but faith is a lifelong process!

Life-long Christians know that there are periods of life in which spiritual zeal is strong, when we are as fervent in our faith as anyone could wish. They also know that there are periods of dryness – times when we may wonder whether we believe anything at all.

There are also degrees of awareness which are meant to deepen as our Christian life progresses. St Paul uses the image of milk vs. solid food to illustrate the progress of Christian understanding in our lives: "*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*" (Heb 5:12-14).

The process of growing discernment enables us to appropriate the righteousness of Christ in an ever-deepening way as our Christ life develops. As we make the teachings in Scripture more our own through reflection and assimilation we become more able to put them into practice in our lives. We thus "work out our salvation" by cooperating with the grace of God working within us – a synergy between God who calls and we who respond to His saving love.

Taking Up Your Cross (Mk 8:11-9:1)

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF PASSAGES that we find in one of the Gospels but not in the others. The raising of Lazarus, for example, is recorded only in John. The birth of John the Baptist, certain of the Lord's parables, such as the Good Samaritan, and Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet are found in only one Gospel, not the others. It may be that the people who first witnessed one of these events or heard a certain teaching were important to the local community and emphasized it in their preaching. Thus this episode found a place in the Gospel written in that community.

This is not the case with the Lord's call for anyone who would seek to be His follower to "*take up his cross and follow me*" (Mk 8:34). This teaching is found in each of the four Gospels, suggesting it was important to the first Christians throughout the early Church. One could not be a Christian without carrying one's cross, they all affirmed, but what does this key passage mean? What is one's cross? Is it one's spouse or one's rheumatism, as is often held, or is it something more?

In the ancient world the cross was a symbol of shame reserved for executing the least important members of society. From about the sixth century BC until the practice was abolished by the Emperor St. Constantine the Great in the fourth century AD, crucifixion was the "preferred" method of executing slaves, captives and the worst criminals who had no rights in the ruling culture. The painful nature of this punishment is the source of our English word ex*cruci*ating.

For Christians the cross quickly became the symbol of sacrifice, of self-giving in imitation of Christ. As Christ's sacrifice on the cross became the moment of His glorification, so the Christian's sacrifice would be seen as the time of his or her exaltation with Christ as well.

Sacrificing One's Life

The first Christians were acutely aware that they might be called to follow Christ to a literal cross, sacrificing their lives as He did. Thus the apostolic brothers Peter and Andrew and some others were actually crucified by pagan authorities. Countless others since then have met their

deaths in a host of ways. Practically every day we commemorate martyrs among the saints. This week alone we honor several martyrs of the Roman persecutions: the Great Martyrs Euphemia (+304), Eustathius and his family (+c. 110), and a dozen others. Local Churches may also commemorate other martyrs from the Persian, Arab, Turkish or Communist persecutions.

For the follower of Christ martyrdom is never very far away. Christians today in many parts of Asia and Africa are giving up their lives rather than deny their faith in Christ their Savior. The demise of militant atheistic Communism was followed quickly by the rise of militant Islamism and even militant Hinduism and ultra-Orthodox Judaism as these peoples strive vainly to purify their cultures from foreign influences. Recently a watchdog group in Europe concluded that throughout the world more that 100,000 Christians are killed each year "because of some relation to their faith."

Sacrificing One's Self

As Christ's death was the consequence of His assuming our whole nature, the sacrifice of blood-martyrdom is inseparably tied to the martyr's witness to Christ. The very word *martyr* means witness, a witness made at the cost of one's life. The Gospel indicates another kind of witnessing unto death in this passage, when Christ says, "*let him deny himself, and take up his cross…*" (Mk 8:34). In addition to our physical life which may be sacrificed in blood-martyrdom, we also have an inner life the life of our ego. We want to do this, own that, eat or drink this. We can satisfy every urge our material resources allow or we can deny ourselves to witness to Christ. This is the heart of asceticism, whether in its institutional expression, monasticism, or in the call of every Christian to place God and others first in our lives.

The first such self-denial is that to which St Paul urges us: "*Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Rom 6:11). We are called to destroy that part of us which is bound up with sin – the passions of our broken human nature – and be crucified interiorly.

In another place St Paul becomes more explicit: "*Therefore put to death your members which are of the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry*" (Col 3:5). As St Augustine noted centuries ago, this does not mean that we are to kill or maim ourselves "…but it does mean that one should kill whatever in oneself is unduly attached to the earthly, which makes one take inordinate pleasure in this present life to the neglect of the life to come" (Letter to Laetus). We are to deal violently with our sinful actions and inclinations in imitation of Christ's death on the cross.

In no previous age has the average person been more able to avail himself of entertainments every day. In our society the stuff of popular entertainment is sin: greed, lust, violence and the rest. It permeates TV, sleazy movies, the Internet and even commercials. It appeals to the voyeur and the gossiper in us. The follower of Christ is called to put aside these entertainments, dying to internet porn, celebrity gossip and whatever else is "*of the earth*."

Our economy is built on consumerism: buying the newest, biggest whatever – simply because we can. Commercials would have us believe that doing so will make us happy and fulfilled. The message of dying to self, on the other hand, calls us to live simply that others may simply live.

Our immediate concerns, our convenience, and the welfare of those closest to us often blind us to the needs of the wider Church and the world around us. Can dying to self also involve putting to death the parochialism of our everyday lives?

It often happens, as St. Augustine noted, that our cross drags us along, rather than we carry it. We find the precepts of the Gospel burdensome rather than life-giving and we observe them only out of a sense of obligation. When we do take up the cross, the Fathers remind us, we need to keep our eyes upon Christ whom we are but following. In the words of Caesarius of Arles, "To what place are we to follow Christ if not where He has already gone? We know that He has risen and ascended into heaven; there, then, we must follow Him. There is no cause for despair – by ourselves we can do nothing, but we have Christ's promise…Human sin made the road rough; Christ's resurrection has leveled it. By passing over it Himself, He transformed the narrowest of tracks into a royal highway" (Sermon 159, 6).

September 23 – Conception of the Holy Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John

IN THE CALENDAR USED TODAY by the Byzantine Churches the Liturgical Year begins on September 1. In earlier calendars used in some local Churches, however, the year began with the Feast of the Conception of St John the Forerunner. This feast originated in the East in the fifth century and was observed in some Western dioceses as well although it is not on the general Western calendar.

The basis for this feast is the sequence of events recorded in Luke 1:5-25 – the annunciation to Zachariah, the penalty of Zechariah and the conception of John.

The Annunciation to Zachariah

"*There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zachariah, of the division of Abijah* [Abihu]. *His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blameless in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years*" (vv. 5-7).

In 1 Chronicles 24:7-19 we read that King David and Zadok the High Priest set a schedule for each of the priestly families (named after the sons of Aaron) to serve in the temple. Each family served for eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath, twice each year. During their times of service the priests lived in the temple quarters, away from their wives and children. In addition all the divisions served during the "pilgrimage feasts" – Pesach, Shavuoth (Pentecost) and Sukkoth (Tabernacles) – when all Jewish men were expected to come to Jerusalem and offer sacrifices.

"*So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zachariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him*" (vv. 8-12).

Some commentators think that the mention of "*the multitude of the people*" suggests that this event took place during one of the pilgrimage feasts. It could also have been on a Sabbath when more people would have come to worship. St John Chrysostom thought that Zachariah was in Jerusalem for the Day of Atonement when the angel visited him.

"*But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord'*" (vv. 13-17).

The angel's message describes John as a prophet, calling the people to repentance. The mention that he "*shall drink neither wine nor strong drink*" suggests that John would also be a Nazarite: one set apart and consecrated to the Lord by a special vow. The first requirement for a Nazarite is that "*he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink*" (Num 6:3). Nazarites were forbidden to cut their hair or do anything that would make them ritually impure. These practices come down to us in monasticism, for which John is a model.

Zachariah's Penalty

"*And Zachariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.' And the angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.' And the people waited for Zachariah, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless*" (vv. 18-22).

It is often wondered why Zachariah was penalized for questioning Gabriel when the Holy Virgin was not (see Lk 1:34). Perhaps it is because conception by a virgin was unknown while there were well-known cases of God enabling conception in old age in the Old Testament. As a priest Zachariah was surely familiar with Sarah's conception of Isaac (see Gen 17:15-19) and the conception of the Nazarite Samson by the elderly wife of Manoah (see Judges 13). Each of them would play a critical part in the development of God's plan for His people, as would John.

Another well-known woman who conceived in answer to prayer is Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel (see 1 Sm 1, 2). Long childless, she prayed, "*O LORD of hosts, if You will… give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head*." Samuel, dedicated as a Nazarite before he was conceived, would be the spiritual guide of David and Solomon.

The Conception of John

"*So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, 'Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people*'" (vv. 23-25).

Zachariah and Elizabeth lived in the "hill country" of Judea (see Lk 1:39). The town of Ein Kerem, southwest of Jerusalem has long been revered as the place of Zachariah's home, the Visitation and John's birth. Texts from the sixth and seventh centuries attest to celebrations there connected with the Forerunner and his parents. The tenth-century *Book of the Demonstration*, attributed to Eutychius of Alexandria noted: "The church of Bayt Zakariya in the district of Aelia bears witness to the visit of Mary to her kinswoman Elizabeth." The two modern churches of St John in Ein Kerem (Orthodox and Roman Catholic) were each built on the remnants of ancient churches.

At the time that Zachariah officiated as a priest in the holy Temple, presenting the prayers of the people to the compassionate Benefactor, he saw an Angel of God, who began to speak to him and said, "Your prayer has been heard! Take courage, old man, and do not doubt. You will have as your child the holy Forerunner, who will be the greatest of those born of women; and in the power of Elijah, he will go before Christ!" (*Vespers Sticheron)*

Joy to you, O barren one unable to give birth! Behold, you conceive today the one who is really a Torch of the Sun, who will enlighten the whole world that suffered from blindness. Rejoice, O Zachariah, and cry out in all confidence: "The one who will be born is a Prophet of the Most High!" (*Troparion*)

September 26 - Dormition of St John the Theologian

The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

APART FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT texts themselves, there are few historically verifiable references to the lives of the holy apostles. We know most about those whose writings are found in the Scriptures: St Paul, St Peter and St John, whose dormition (peaceful repose) Byzantine Churches remember on September 26.

The Gospels tell us that John and his brother James were the sons of Zebedee, a Galilean fisherman, and disciples of John the Baptist. Along with Peter and Andrew, they were among the first whom Jesus called to follow him and become "*fishers of men*" (Mt 4:19, Mk 1:17). Their mother, Salome, would become one of the myrrh-bearers, the women who attended to the needs of Christ and His disciples.

James and John would form, along with Peter, the innermost circle of Christ's followers. It was they who were privileged to witness His transfiguration on Mount Tabor and to pray with Him in Gethsemane before His arrest. In addition John is referred to as "*the disciple whom Jesus*

loved" (Jn 13:23, 19:26, 21:7), the one who leaned on the Lord's chest at the Supper. He was perhaps the youngest of the twelve and the one for whom the Lord had a special affection. Since Christ's own half-brother, James the son of Joseph would not be one of His disciples until after the resurrection, it was to John that the Lord entrusted the care of His holy Mother as He hung dying on the cross (see Jn 19:26).

Finally, we see that John was Peter's companion in exploring the empty tomb of Christ (Jn 20:1-10). The Acts of the Apostles tell us that, after Pentecost, John accompanied Peter in his ministry in Jerusalem and the surrounding region. Along with Peter and his brother, James, John is one of the "pillars" of the Jerusalem community whom Paul visits in the holy city (See Gal 2:9). After that, John disappears as a character in the Scriptural narrative and we must turn elsewhere to learn about him.

John in Asia Minor

St Irenaeus of Lyons, who died in 202, tells us that John wrote his Gospel in Ephesus. His source for this is the hieromartyr St Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (+156) who was himself a disciple of John in his youth. At some point – perhaps after the death of the Theotokos or that of his brother James – John left Jerusalem and ministered among the Christians in Ephesus, one of the largest cities in the Mediterranean world at the time.

John lived longer than any other of the disciples and people came to believe that he would not die before the Lord's return in glory. Finally, of course, he did repose; according to St Polycarp, it was during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (98-117). It may be that the last chapter of John's Gospel was added in light of his passing. There we read that *"Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, 'Lord, who is the one who betrays You?' Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, 'But Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.' Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?'*(Jn 21:18-23). Then the author of this chapter – perhaps John's disciple Prochoros, who assisted John in his writing – adds, "*This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true*" (v. 24).

John died peacefully at Ephesus – the only one of the Twelve not martyred – and was buried outside the city. The sixth century chronicler Procopius of Caesarea wrote that "On that site the natives had set up a church in early times to the Apostle John… This church, which was small and in a ruined condition because of its great age, the Emperor Justinian tore down to the ground and replaced by a church so large and beautiful, that, to speak briefly, it resembles very closely in all respects, and is a rival to, the shrine which is dedicated to all the Apostles in the imperial city…" (*The Buildings of Justinian*, 5).

John as Theologian

When Procopius described the burial place of St John he noted that "this Apostle has been named 'the Theologian,' because the nature of God was described by him in a manner beyond the unaided power of man." John's emphases on Christ as the eternal Word of God, on the Holy

Spirit as the living water energizing the believer and on the Lord as the Bread of life are just a few of the aspects of John which prompted Clement of Alexandria to call it the most spiritual of the Gospels. As Origen would write, "I daresay that the first-fruits of all the Scriptures are the Gospels and the first-fruits of the Gospels is the Gospel handed on by John. No one can grasp its meaning without reclining on Jesus' breast and receiving Mary from Jesus to become his own mother" (*On John* 1, 4). Writing in the eleventh century Blessed Theophylact of Ochrid summed up the Church's esteem for John's Gospel, saying that it is "the beginning of theology."

Only two other figures would be accorded a similar title in the Byzantine Churches: St Gregory the Theologian in the fourth century and St Symeon the New Theologian in the eleventh. Gregory's reflections on the Holy Trinity and Symeon's on the Holy Spirit spoke to the Church as coming from a deep familiarity with the mystery of God which was manifested in their writings.

Other Johannine Writings

The author of the Book of Revelation says that he had been exiled to the largely barren island of Patmos "*for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus*" (Rev 1:9). The early second century writer, St Justin the Philosopher, was the first to identify the author of Revelation as John the Apostle (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 81.4). John, it came to be said, was exiled from Ephesus along with his companion Prochorus in the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96) and was allowed to return only after Domitian was assassinated**.** In many editions of the New Testament the book came to be identified as "The Revelation to St John the Theologian" (or, in older English usage, St. John the Divine).

Yet this identification did not pass unchallenged in the East. St Dionysius the Great, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria from 248-265 argued that the style of Revelation is too different from that of the fourth Gospel to have been composed by the same man. Some contemporary scholars agree that it is "doubtful that the book could have been put into its present form by the same person(s) responsible for the fourth gospel" (Introduction, St Joseph Edition, New American Bible).

By and large, however, East and West accepted that Revelation was given to John the Apostle. A monastery dedicated to the 'beloved disciple' was founded on Patmos in the late tenth century and it has been a place of pilgrimage ever since.

It is generally recognized that the First Epistle of John emphasized themes from the Gospel and could have been written by the same hand. The same is not true of 2 and 3 John. Around AD 600, St Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, noted that "two epistles bearing his name ... are considered by some to be the work of a certain John the Presbyter," perhaps another of the Theologian's disciples in the Church at Ephesus.

The Eastern Orthodox Church and those Eastern Catholic Churches which follow the Byzantine Rite commemorate the "Repose of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian" on September 26. On May 8 they celebrate the "Feast of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian", on which date Christians used to draw forth from his grave fine ashes which were believed to be effective for healing the sick. According to one tradition, when St John was over

100 years old, he took seven of his disciples outside of Ephesus and had them dig a grave in the shape of a cross. St. John then went into the grave, and the disciples buried him there, alive. Later on, when his grave was opened, St. John's body was not there. “On May 8 of each year,” they say, “dust rises up from his grave, by which the sick are healed of various diseases.”

LETE (Tone 1) At Vespers for St John

O Apostle, rivers of theology have poured forth from your venerable mouth. Watered by them the Church of God worships the consubstantial Trinity in the Orthodox Faith. Intercede that the Church be made strong and that we may be saved, O John the Theologian.

The lily of purity, the fragrant myrrh, has again come upon us in this present feast so that we may cry aloud, “O John, the Apostle who reclined against the chest of the Master and made the word fall on the world like rain, who watched over the Virgin as the apple of your eyes, ask Christ that we may receive great mercy.”

O Disciple of the Savior, on the Cross Christ entrusted the pure Virgin, the Mother of God to you, O virginal Theologian; and you protected her as the apple of your eye. Intercede for the salvation of our souls.

As an eyewitness of the ineffable mysteries, you cried aloud that the pre-eternal Word was in the beginning with God and that He is God, O John, beloved Apostle of Christ and His true friend, delight of the Trinity, unshaken pillar of Ephesus and Patmos, and our helper. Intercede, O blessed Theologian, for the people who faithfully keep your memory to be delivered from impious enemies, both visible and invisible.

(Tone 2) Come, O faithful, and let us bless the highest of the apostles, the trumpet of theology, the spiritual general who subjected the whole inhabited earth: John, the disciple worthy of our hymns. Translated from earth, he does not remain aloof from it, but lives in Heaven awaiting the awesome second coming of the Master. O mystic friend of Christ, who rested on His bosom, ask that we who lovingly celebrate your sacred memory may meet Him uncondemned.

v. Glory … (Tone 4) Beloved Disciple, reclining on the bosom of Christ at the Supper of the Lord, you drew forth from it ineffable mysteries which you were permitted to reveal; and your heavenly voice thundered out to all: “In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was in God’s presence; and the Word was God!” He is Christ our God and the Savior of our souls, the true Light that enlightens every man coming into this world.

October 1 – St Romanos the Melodist

ONE OF THE MORE POPULAR CHANTS in our Church is the kondakion of Christ’s Nativity, “Today the Virgin gives birth…” What many do not know is that this hymn is an excerpt from a much longer work and that it was written by St Romanos the Melodist.

Who is This Saint?

St Romanos was born in Homs, Syria (some say Damascus), to a Jewish family in the latter part of the fifth century. We do not know when he was baptized or whether his family was converted as well. As a young man, he moved to Beirut and entered the service of the local Church. One source says that he was ordained a deacon there; others say that his ordination came later.

During the reign of Emperor Anastasios (490-518) Romanos moved again, this time to Constantinople where the patriarch accepted him among the local clergy. He lived at the Monastery of the Theotokos in Kyros, a district of the capital. He ended his life as sacristan of the Great Church, an important position responsible for the vessels and other liturgical items of Hagia Sophia. It was here that he composed his poetic works.

According to a popular legend, Romanos did not have a pleasing voice or any special skill as a chanter. To embarrass him at a service attended by the emperor (perhaps the Royal Hours) other clerics gave him a difficult piece to chant which drew attention to his limitations. Afterwards, while Romanos was resting before the All-Night Vigil for the feast, the Theotokos appeared to him in a dream, offering him a scroll to eat. As we say in the canon for this feast, "Appearing to you at night, the Ever-virgin, who truly gave birth to the incarnate Son of God, illumined your soul and filled your mind with divine understanding."

That night Romanos mounted the ambo again and astounded the congregation with his hymn, "Today the Virgin gives birth…" From then on Romanos' poetic and music gifts became legendary. He has been called "Sweet Singer," "*theorrhetor*" (God's poet), and "the Pindar of rhythmic poetry."

Romanos' Verse Form: the Kondakion

Romanos' great contribution to liturgical poetry is the kondakion. The hymn to which we give that title in our services today is simply the first verse of the kondakia which Romanos, and others after him, had composed. Romanos' kondakia were more like the Akathist Hymns we know: a series of poetic verses sung by a soloist with recurring refrains sung by the people or choir. Romanos was often credited with composing the Akathist to the Theotokos, but this does not seem to be the case.

Romanos did compose a number of kondakia, several of which have survived although most of them are no longer used liturgically. A newer poetic form, the canon was popularized in the eighth century by two other Syrian saints, the step-brothers John of Damascus and Cosmas of Maiuma. Canons came to replace the kondakia in the services of the Byzantine Churches.

Musicologists believe that the kondakion had its origin in a type of Syriac poetical homily called the *memrâ*, which was a sort of paraphrase of a Gospel passage, a kind of homily or sermon in verse that was chanted to music. A kind of *memrâ* is still heard today in the popular Arabic verses sung in honor of the participants at a wedding or baptism. Romanos blended this Syriac form with the conventions of classical Greek dramatic poetry.

The Kondakion of the Nativity

The following are the first three (of the 24) verses of St Romanos' Nativity Kondakion which illustrate the style of this poetic form"

Today the Virgin gives birth
to the Transcendent in Essence,
And the earth presents a cave
to the Inaccessible.
The angels with the shepherds
sing His glory
And the Wise Men with the star
travel on their way,
For to us is born a little Child
who is God from all eternity.

Bethlehem has opened Eden, come, let us see; we have found delight in secret, come, let us receive the joys of Paradise within the cave. There the unwatered root whose blossom is forgiveness has appeared. There has been found the undug well from which David once longed to drink. There a virgin has borne a babe and has quenched at once Adam's and David's thirst. For this, let us hasten to this place where there has been born *a little Child who is God from all eternity*.

The mother's Father has willingly become her Son, the infants' savior is laid as an infant in a manger. As she who bore him contemplates him, she says, "Tell me, my Child, how were you sown, or how were you planted in me? I see you, my flesh and blood, and I am amazed, because I give suck and yet I am not married. And though I see you in swaddling clothes, I know that the flower of my virginity is sealed, for you preserved it when, in your good pleasure, you were born *a little Child who is God from all eternity*.

"High King, what have You to do with beggars? Maker of heaven, why have You come to those born of earth? Did You love a cave or take pleasure in a manger? See, there is no place for Your servant in the inn, I do not say a place, not even a cave, for that too belongs to another. To Sara, when she bore a child, a vast land was given as her lot. To me, not even a fox hole. I used the cavern where willingly You made your dwelling," *a little Child who is God from all eternity.*"

Down to the twelfth century this Christmas kondakion was performed by a double choir (from Hagia Sophia and the Holy Apostles) at the imperial banquet on the feast of Christ's Nativity.

Romanos' Other Works

A number of other kondakia by this saint have been translated into English. Only two of them are still used liturgically, at least in part. The first verse of Romanos' Kondakion on the Victory of the Cross is sung on the Third Sunday of the Great Fast: "The angel's fiery sword will no longer guard the gate of Paradise, for the cross of the Lord has put it out wondrously. The power of death has been broken, the victory of Hades wiped out, and You, my Savior, have stood up and called out to all those bound in hell: 'Come now, and enter into heaven.'"

The first verse of his Kondakion for the Palms is still sung on Palm Sunday: "O Christ God, enthroned in heaven and on earth riding upon a colt, You have accepted the praise of the angels and the hymns of the children who were crying out to You, 'Blessed are You who come to restore Adam.''

We might reflect on these first verses of Romanos' Kondakion on the Passion which is no longer used in our services:

"Today the foundations of the earth were shaken. The sun was changed, for it could not bear to watch. For the One who gives life to all was being put on a cross, Paradise had been opened to the transgression of old – *Only, Adam dances*."

Heaven, tremble and be amazed. Earth, sink down in chaos. Sun, do not dare to look on your Master willingly hanged upon the Tree.
Let rocks be shattered, for the Rock of life is now being wounded by the nails. Let the veil of the temple be rent in two as the Master's body is pierced with a lance by the lawless. In short, let all creation tremble, groan at the passion of the Creator. *Only, Adam dances.*

October 6 – The Holy Apostle Thomas

A Radiant Sunrise to the People of India

THE GOSPELS TELLS US LITTLE about Christ's chosen disciples other than their names. A few of them – Peter, John, and Philip – feature in the early chapters of Acts but there is little said about the others.

Thomas is more prominent in John than in the other Gospels. The story of Thomas and the risen Christ in John 20 is one of the most compelling tales in the resurrection Gospels. In Byzantine Churches this passage is read in two sections, as it occurred. At vespers on Pascha we read the story of Thomas' doubts when told that Christ had risen. On the following Sunday – "Thomas Sunday" – we read of his encounter with the risen Christ which evoked his act of faith in Christ as "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).

Non-scriptural tales and writings associated with one or another of the apostles were widely circulated in the first centuries; foremost among them were stories attributed to St. Thomas. The earliest and most widely held concerned Thomas as the Enlightener of India.

The Church beyond the Empire

While the Acts of the Apostles details the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, we know that at the same time Christ was being preached to Jews and Gentiles beyond the borders of the empire: specifically, to the East, in Osrhoene (Mesopotamia), Parthia and Persia and as far as India, especially wherever Jewish colonies could be found.

Traders traveling by caravan or ship were common in the Middle East in the time of Christ. The Greek historian Strabo (64 BC -AD 24) writes of as many as 120 ships sailing through the Red

Sea to India every year. St Thomas reportedly sailed to India in AD 52 in one of these ships in the company of a merchant.

Jewish merchants had settled in towns along the Old Silk Road and in the coastal cities of India as far back as the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BC. After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 even more Jews fled Palestine and settled in the established Jewish colonies. It was among them that St Thomas would have a lasting success.

Jews had a thriving colony on the Malabar (west) coast of India. They settled in Muziris, the center of the Chera dynasty, near Cochin, where an ancient synagogue may still be seen. According to local tradition St Thomas and his companions organized a number of communities along this southwestern coast of India. There are still several churches in modern-day Kerala, home of the ***St. Thomas Christians,*** which claim to have been founded by St Thomas.

After several years the apostle undertook a missionary journey to the Coromandel (eastern) Coast where he converted, among others, the wife and son of the prefect of Mylapore, near Madras. The prefect charged Thomas with bewitching them and had Thomas imprisoned. He was tortured and then executed by being pierced with spears in AD 72. The place of his execution outside Mylapore is revered as St Thomas' Mount to this day.

At first the body of St Thomas was enshrined in Mylapore, where miracles were associated with its presence. In AD 232 the bulk of the relics were brought from India to Edessa, the Syriac Christian center at the edge of the Roman Empire. A shrine was erected to house these relics which attracted the attention of the pilgrim-nun Egeria who visited it in the 380s. She described her visit in a letter she sent to her convent in Spain:

"We arrived at Edessa in the Name of Christ our God, and, on our arrival, we straightway repaired to the church and memorial of Saint Thomas. There, according to custom, prayers were made and the other things that were customary in the holy places were done; we read also some things concerning Saint Thomas himself. The church there is very great, very beautiful and of new construction, well worthy to be the house of God, and as there was much that I desired to see, it was necessary for me to make a three days' stay there."

St Ephrem the Syrian, who wrote several poetic hymns in the apostle's honor, has Satan bewail the powerful presence of Thomas' relics in Edessa:

"I stirred up Death to slay the Apostles, that by their death I might escape their blows. But harder still am I now striken: the Apostle I slew in India has overtaken me in Edessa. … I went there and he was there. I found him both here and there, to my grief."

The shrine was destroyed by the Zengids, a Turkish tribe who conquered Edessa in 1144. The relics were taken to Patmos, Greece and Ortono, in the Abruzzo region near Rome, where they still remain.

St Thomas' Writings?

Several early texts are connected with St Thomas:

The Acts of Thomas (c. 180-230) – an early third-century Syriac work that tells the story of his missions in India. It is generally accepted as in line with the proven history of the day.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas – written about the same time, this work contains a fanciful rendering of Jesus' early years focused on prodigies and magic tricks He performs on His teacher and other children.

The Gospel of Thomas – the time of its composition unknown, this work was discovered in Greek and Coptic translations in the modern era. It presents "sayings" of Jesus that reflect a kind of Gnostic philosophy which circulated in Egypt in the early Christian era.

While TV commentators speculate wonderingly about these "suppressed" sayings of the Lord, a more reliable evaluation of them comes from the fourth-century Father, St Cyril of Jerusalem: "Let none read *The Gospel according to Thomas*, for it is the work, not of one of the twelve apostles, but one of Mani's three wicked disciples" (Catechesis 5).

St Thomas Christians Today

St. Thomas' missions, being outside the Roman Empire, formed part of the Church of the East. Over time they adopted the liturgy of Edessa, the Syriac Christian center. To this day St Thomas Christians consider their Churches "Syrian."

From the fourth century until the sixteenth the St Thomas Christians received Persian and Assyrian bishops from the Church of the East as their spiritual fathers. An Indian archdeacon administered the day to day affairs of the community. Portuguese colonizers in the sixteenth century ousted the bishops and the archdeacon, replacing them with a Portuguese Latin bishop, beginning a long period of extreme latinization lasting to the time of Vatican II. Since then the Syro- Malabar Catholics have slowly begun recovering aspects of their West Syrian heritage.

About one third of the Thomas Christians refused to accept the Latin hierarchy and turned to the Syriac Patriarch of Antioch for bishops. Since then some Thomas Christians observe a form of their traditional East Syrian rite of Edessa (Church of the East, Syro-Malabar Catholics) while others follow the West Syrian rite of Antioch (Malankara Syrian Orthodox, Syro-Malankara Catholics and the Mar Thoma Church, a reformed Orthodox group which adopted some Anglican practices during the British rule of India).

Each of these Churches has at least one diocese in the United States today.

Sunday between October 11-18: Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

FOR MANY PEOPLE icons are synonymous with a Byzantine church, Catholic or Orthodox. It took centuries for church iconography to develop to the pattern we know and the Seventh Ecumenical Council, commemorated today, played an important part in that development.

In 1932 archeologists discovered a third-century synagogue in Dura (Fort) Europos, Syria, a military stronghold during the Greek and Roman occupation of the region. The city fell during a Persian invasion at the end of that century and was never rebuilt. The synagogue included reasonably well-preserved frescos of Biblical scenes and personages in three tiers above a frieze with symbols at floor level. A smaller Christian house-church with similar frescos was also unearthed.

Church iconography in the first centuries AD generally followed the Dura-Europus pattern. The upper walls, ceilings and domes were frescoed with images of Biblical – particularly Gospel scenes, and icons of the saints. At floor level, below the frescoes, there would be a painted frieze or marble panels. Panel icons put forth for veneration were introduced much later.

Panel icons seem to have first been meant for private use. The oldest existing panel icons, at the Greek monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai in Egypt, date from the sixth century. The custom of venerating icons so developed that images were banned by the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (the Isaurian) sometime between 726 and 730. Icons were removed from churches and public places in the capitol. The cross was the only image permitted.

The emperor's iconoclastic efforts came to the attention of Pope Gregory III who convoked a local synod in Rome in 731 to affirm the veneration of icons. It decreed the "If anyone, for the future, shall take away, destroy, or dishonor the images of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of His Mother, the immaculate and glorious Virgin Mary, or of the Saints, he shall be excluded from the body and blood of Our Lord and the unity of the Church."

Leo's son, Constantine V, sought formal Church endorsement for the ban on icons. He convoked a council at Hieria near Constantinople in 754. Over three hundred bishops attended, though none of the apostolic patriarchs or their representatives were present. The council supported the iconoclastic positions of Leo and Constantine and was proclaimed as the seventh ecumenical council.

Iconoclasm was not popular among the people of Constantinople or the monks who worked against the imperial decrees. The Council of Hieria was also condemned by a local council in Rome, the AD 767 Lateran Council, which reaffirmed the teaching of the earlier Synod of Rome. The West would not support the iconoclastic emperors and in effect severed communion with Constantinople.

The Second Council of Nicea

Iconoclasm continued through Constantine's reign. His son, Leo IV, tried half-heartedly to reconcile the parties but died after only five years as emperor. His son, Constantine VI became emperor at the age of nine, ruling with his mother, Irene, as regent. Irene began the movement to restore icon veneration in earnest. When Patriarch Tarasios was appointed in 784, he accepted on the condition that communion with the other Churches must be reestablished. This required calling an ecumenical council.

The council met in 787. Over 300 bishops attended, including two legates from Rome. Several bishop renounced iconoclasm. The Roman legates read letters of Pope Hadrian I asking for agreement with veneration of images, to which question the bishops of the council answered: "We follow, we receive, we admit". The council discussed the theology of icons and condemned the doctrine of the Council of Hieria.

The Second Nicene Council issued its own teaching on icons, saying: "As the sacred and life-giving cross is everywhere set up as a symbol, so also should the images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the holy angels, as well as those of the saints and other pious and holy men be embodied in the manufacture of sacred vessels, tapestries, vestments, etc., and exhibited on the walls of churches, in the homes, and in all conspicuous places, by the roadside and everywhere, to be revered by all who might see them. For the more they are contemplated, the more they move to fervent memory of their prototypes. Therefore, it is proper to accord to them a fervent and reverent adoration, not the veritable worship which, according to our faith, belongs to the Divine Being alone — for the honor accorded to the image passes over to its prototype, and whoever adores the image adores in it the reality of what is there represented."

Still, iconoclasm was not yet eradicated. Twenty-seven years later, Emperor Leo V began a second period of iconoclasm which lasted from 814 to 842. Another Synod ratified iconoclasm which remained the official teaching under the next two emperors, Michael II and Theophilos. When Theophilos died in 842 he left his two-year old son, Michael III, as emperor under the regency of his mother, Theodora.

Theodora repeated the pattern set by her predecessor Irene. She permitted the restoration of icons in the churches and appointed the like-minded Methodios I as patriarch. A week after his appointment Methodios carried icons in a triumphal procession from the church of Blachernae to Hagia Sophia, restoring their veneration to the church. This event is remembered on the first Sunday of the Great Fast, the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

Not Talismans but Pointers

What caused iconoclasm to begin with? The seventh century had seen the increased popularity of panel icons. Some people began to see there icons, not as indicators of the presence of God in the world but as charms. Icons became more important in some people's eyes than the holy mysteries themselves.

Writing in the seventh century, Saint Anastasius of Sinai documented some of these abuses: "Many think that he sufficiently reveres his baptism who, entering the church, kisses all the icons without paying any attention to the Liturgy and the divine service." Other curious practices became common: the customs of taking icons as godparents for one's children, of adding paint scraped from icons to the Eucharistic chalice, of laying the sacrament upon an icon so as to receive it from a saint's hand, etc. Legitimate reactions against such abuses crossed the line into iconoclasm, the complete rejection of icons.

If our icons are ends in themselves – whether collecting them or venerating them – they have become talismans or charms for us. Rather they are meant, as 2 Nicea taught, to point us to the

ones they represent that we may have living relationships with them in prayer. It is surely right to venerate their icons. Our veneration of these icons reaches its true goal in the living relationship we have with the ones whose images are depicted on them.

How Many Ecumenical Councils Have There Been?

THE BYZANTINE CHURCHES commemorate liturgically each of the seven Ecumenical Councils of the first millennium. Both Catholic and Orthodox Churches have held important councils since then, but none of those councils are celebrated with liturgical feasts in either the East or the West. Why are only the seven Councils which we commemorate so set apart?

An answer may be found in the title of a recent book on these councils, edited by Sergey Trostyanskiy. Its title, *Seven Icons of Christ*, indicated the unique character of these gatherings. They articulated the heart of the Church's faith in Christ, expressed in the first two councils by the Creed. The five councils which followed nuanced this faith by insisting that to say that the incarnate Word was "fully God and fully man" meant that He was one person in two natures (Chalcedon), that, as one person, His Mother could be called Theotokos (Ephesus), that He had both a divine and a human will (3 Constantinople) and that as truly man He could legitimately be depicted in icons (2 Nicaea).

While all these councils were accepted by the Greek and Latin Churches in the first millennium, the Church of the East and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Armenians, Copts, etc.) only accepted some of them. Beginning in 1988 all these Churches signed agreed statements of faith with both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Thus, while using contrasting terms and upholding different councils, all the historic Churches share a common faith in Christ as truly God and man.

Was There an Eighth Council?

In the ninth century, we find the first signs that the Greeks and Latins had seemingly irreconcilable differences. Two councils were held in Constantinople to resolve the question of who was the rightful patriarch of Constantinople. At that time, the patriarchs were closely tied to the imperial court and their fortunes rose or fell depending on who ruled the empire. The situation was intricate; the following timeline may help clarify it.

847 – Ignatius, of royal stock and an anti-iconoclast, became patriarch shortly after the Triumph of Orthodoxy (restoration of icons).

857 – With a regime change, Ignatius loses imperial support and is deposed. He is replaced as patriarch by Photios. The new patriarch quarreled with the Pope of Rome over which of them had jurisdiction in Bulgaria.

867 – A new emperor, seeking an alliance with the West, deposed Photios and recalled Ignatius. Contrary to expectations, Ignatius would not cede Bulgaria to the pope.

869-870 –A council met in Constantinople to decide the status of clerics ordained by Photios. The pope sent three legates who presided. The other patriarchs were represented as well. Photios was condemned for rousing "continuous turmoil and storms for all the Churches of Christ our Savior, in a multiplicity of ways" and his supporters were deposed.

This council also challenged the imperial practice of deposing patriarchs, decreeing: "We declare that no secular powers should treat with disrespect any of those who hold the office of patriarch or seek to move them from their high positions, but rather they should esteem them as worthy of all honor and reverence …. If, then, any ruler or secular authority tries to expel the aforesaid pope of the apostolic see, or any of the other patriarchs, let him be anathema." This canon would be invoked in later centuries as the Pope of Rome struggled for independence from various rulers.

877 – Ignatius dies and Photios is restored as patriarch with no significant opposition.

879-880 – Another council is called, again with representatives of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. The Roman legate presented Photios with a pallium sent by the pope. The council fathers abrogated the council of 869-870 and sealed the union of Rome and Constantinople, disrupted by the Photian affair.

This council became important later because it had implicitly rejected the addition of the *Filioque* to the Creed, an addition which was not yet used in Rome at that time. The fathers condemned those who would "impose on it [the Creed] their own invented phrases … and display the audacity to falsify completely the antiquity of this sacred and venerable rule with illegitimate words, or additions, or subtractions." It was not until the eleventh century that Rome would accept the *Filioque*.

After the eleventh century, when the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople had excommunicated one another, Western canonists began to designate the Council of 869-870 as the Eighth Ecumenical Council. Acts of this council are not found in any Byzantine canonical collections, however.

In the fourteenth century, when the controversy between hesychast and scholastic theologians was raging, some Greeks began referring to the Council of 879-880 as the Eighth Ecumenical Council. This designation is generally not followed by all Orthodox. In the words of Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev, "Since the seven ecumenical councils represent the fullness of the Church's teaching, an eighth council is not only superfluous, but also quite dangerous."

Later Councils

Several other councils have had enough of an impact upon the Churches of East and West that they have been deemed by some to be Ecumenical Councils. In the Greek Church the **Hesychast Councils of Constantinople**, held between 1341 and 1351 are sometimes referred to as the Ninth Ecumenical Council. This council endorsed the theology of St Gregory Palamas, upholding the distinction between the essence and the energies of God as well as man's ability to commune with these energies.

Some Orthodox have proposed that the **Council of Jassy (1642)**, which countered some trends from Roman Catholic and Protestant theology, and the **Council of Jerusalem (1672)**, which refuted Calvinism, should also be considered as ecumenical. The encyclical of the 2016 Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Churches simply described them as "later councils of universal authority."

There have been thirteen other councils which Roman Catholics generally consider to have been ecumenical:
Five Lateran Councils (1123, 1139, 1179, 1215, 1512-1517) – chiefly concerned with Western Church discipline and reform;
Two Councils of Lyons (1245, 1274) – The first was concerned with the Crusade led by King Louis IX of France. The second unsuccessfully sought a reunion with the Greek Church.
Council of Vienne (1311-1313) and the **Council of Constance (1414-1418) –** dealing with local schisms and heretical movements.
Council of Basle-Ferrara-Florence (1431-1439) – concerned with Church reforms and another unsuccessful attempt at reunion with the Greek Church.
Council of Trent (1545-1563) – The Roman Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation.
First Vatican Council (1869-1870) – Decreed papal infallibility.
Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) – Concerned with expressing Church teaching and practice in the contemporary world.

While Catholics usually refer to all these councils as ecumenical, many prefer to call the last thirteen "General Councils of the Catholic Church," more accurately distinguishing them from those which preceded them.

October 15 – The Hieromartyr Lucian of Antioch

MOST CHRISTIANS KNOW that the books of the New Testament – the Gospels, the Epistles and the rest – were written in the first century AD. Some know that these books were compiled as the New Testament sometime in the next three centuries. Few know that the form of the New Testament which we use in our Church – the "Byzantine text" – is largely the work of St Lucian of Antioch, whom our Church remembers on October 15.

Who Was Lucian of Antioch?

Born in c. 240, Lucian was the son of Christian parents in a Syriac-speaking area in eastern Syria. Some say his hometown was Samosata (now Samsat, Turkey). His family was probably not poor as Lucian was educated in Edessa, tutored by Macarios the Confessor.

Early in life Lucian moved Antioch, Syria's principal city, where Paul of Samosata was then the bishop. Lucian was ordained a presbyter and attached to the Antiochian Church's theological school where he soon became its leading figure.

Lucian's patron, Paul of Samosata, was a controversial figure who divided the Church at Antioch for a number of years. It seems that Paul, of humble origins, was ambitious and somewhat

worldly. He took on a civil post in addition to being bishop of Antioch and was accused of spending more energy on his secular post than on serving the Church. The fourth-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea claimed that Paul conducted himself "more like a rhetorician or a mountebank than a bishop."

Paul's love for luxury was not his most serious failure in the eyes of his peers. His critics also accused him of such serious theological errors that the bishops of the province deposed him at a local council in 269, less than ten years after his election. He was accused of teaching that Christ was of purely human origin and that He was Son of God by grace, not by nature. The bishops elected a certain Dominus to succeed him.

Paul had acquired a degree of power, however, and he did not accept their deposition. The Church of Antioch was divided between the supporters of Paul and those who accepted Dominus as the legitimate bishop. Paul remained in possession of the see until 272 when the Emperor Aurelian intervened in the interests of good order and recognized Paul's deposition.

Many of Paul's followers, including Lucian, continued to reject the authority of Dominus and his successors. His scholarship and deep piety were never in question and his work was widely received. Finally, in about 285, Lucian was reconciled with the current bishop, Cyril, the third successor of Paul.

The School of Antioch

St Lucian is credited with being an important proponent of biblical interpretation in the tradition known as the "School of Antioch." While in the main center of biblical study, Alexandria, allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures was promoted, Antiochian writers stressed a more literal interpretation of sacred texts. They also employed typology to root later texts in continuity with earlier revelation. This style would come to dominate biblical study until the modern age. Fourth-century proponents of this school included Diodoros of Tarsus, John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

The Antiochians also emphasized the distinction between the human and divine in the person of Christ while the Alexandrians stressed the union of the human and divine in Him. In the following century extremes of these views would be described as Nestorian (Antioch) or as Monophysite (Alexandria) and become the defining positions of the Church of the East and the Oriental Orthodox Churches respectively.

Lucian's Bible

Both Old Testament and New Testament studies occupied most of Lucian's career in Antioch. Proficient in Hebrew as well as Greek, Lucian produced an edition of the Septuagint in which he used the Hebrew text to correct copyists' errors and other mistakes which had crept in over the centuries. His version was highly esteemed by St Jerome, the greatest Latin biblical authority of the age. It became the preferred text used in the Antiochian and Byzantine Churches.

Lucian also produced an edition of the (Greek) New Testament which came to be known as the "Byzantine text" used liturgically throughout the Greek-speaking Churches of the East. Centuries

later it would be at the basis of the edition made by the sixteenth-century Dutch scholar, Desiderius Erasmus. This version was generally accepted in the West as the "received text," and used as the basis for many modern translations.

Lucian the Martyr

The greatest and last Roman persecution of Christians began in the year 303 under the Emperor Diocletian. Lucian was arrested in Antioch and transported to the imperial city of Nicomedia, where the emperors often held court. Eusebius recorded that, "…in the presence of the emperor, he proclaimed the heavenly kingdom of Christ, first in an oral defense, and afterwards by deeds as well" (*Ecclesiastical History*, 13, 2).

Lucian was imprisoned for nine years, during which he encouraged the other Christians with him to remain steadfast in their confession of Christ. He suffered both torture and starvation, because he refused the only food given to him, meat that had been offered to Roman idols.

The fourth-century history by Philostorgios of Cappadocia relates that, when bound and chained down on his back in prison, Lucian consecrated the divine mysteries upon his own breast, and communicated the faithful that were present.

Lucian died on January 7, 312, towards the end of the last great persecution of Christians by Roman authorities. His body was taken to Drepanum (later renamed Helenopolis by Constantine in memory of his mother) and was immediately revered by the Church of Antioch and elsewhere. In a homily preached on his feastday in 387 St John Chrysostom urged Christians to follow his example: "He scorned hunger. Let us also scorn luxury and destroy the lordship of the stomach; that we may, when the time comes for us to meet such torture, be prepared beforehand, by the help of a lesser ascesis, to show ourselves worthy of glory in the hour of battle."

St Lucian of Antioch is celebrated in the West on the day of his death, January 7. When the feast of the Theophany was extended in the Eastern Churches by the commemoration of St John the Baptist on that day his feast was moved to October 15.

Vesper Hymns to This Holy Martyr

You made the faithful steadfast, enriching them by your faith and the discourse of knowledge of God, so that they might boldly endure the rage of the tyrant for the sake of the incorruptible life which is to come. Wherefore, we call you blessed, O right glorious Lucian, and we celebrate your divine solemnity today.

Lengthy imprisonment and a most violent death did you endure, O venerable one, bound with bonds, lacerated with sharp-edged shards, O blessed one, weakened by cruel starvation and by long thirst. Wherefore, you manifestly received heavenly food becoming an invincible martyr, O valiant athlete.

October 18 – Holy Apostle and Evangelist Luke

AFTER THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS (September 14) we begin the Cycle of St Luke. Selections from his Gospel are appointed to be read every day at the Divine Liturgy. About one month later, on October 18, we keep the remembrance of St Luke himself.

Aside from a few bits of information in the Scriptures we knew little about St. Luke, even though he composed a substantial part of the New Testament itself. Besides the Gospel St Luke composed the Acts of the Apostles as the second part of the story of Christ and the early Church (see Acts 1:1). Some commentators think that St Luke also had a part in writing the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Luke was a companion of St Paul, probably since his stay at Troas, on the coast of Asia Minor. It is here that St Luke begins speaking of Paul and his companions as "we" (Acts 16:10). Luke is mentioned as St Paul's companion in two epistles, Colossians and Philemon, both written towards the end of Paul's life. When St Paul appealed to Caesar, St Luke accompanied him from Caesarea to Rome (see Acts 28:16). Towards the end of St Paul's life, it seem that Luke was his only companion (see 2 Tim 4:11).

Luke and Antioch

Ancient authors speak of Antioch as Luke's birthplace (Eusebius' *Church History* III and *Gospel Questions* IV) while St Paul says that he was a physician (Col 4:14). It seems that he was not a Jew. In the same passage others are mentioned as Jews but Luke is not. "*Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner greets you with Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, about whom you received instructions (if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus, who is called Justus. These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision*" (Col 4:10-11).

As a native of Antioch Luke was likely a Greek but he may have been one of the many Greek proselytes to Judaism in the city, which also had a notable Jewish population. In the first-centuryAD proselytes to Judaism were generally pagans (Greeks and Romans) who had come to believe in one God, worshipped in the synagogue and observed the morality of the Jews. They had not accepted circumcision, nor did they observe ceremonial laws. Many of them came to accept Jesus as the Christ.

Did St. Luke See Christ?

One tradition, first mentioned in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius, says that St. Luke was one of the Seventy, the second circle of disciples called by Christ. He is often mentioned in commentaries as the unnamed companion of Cleopas who encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. This idea is even found in our Menologion, the liturgical book containing the service for his feast.

Others, however, say that there was no evidence that Luke, an educated Greek from Antioch, had been in Galilee or Judea during Christ's ministry, although it cannot be ruled out. In the first verses of the Gospel Luke describes himself as having investigated everything carefully, which is why he wrote this narrative for Theophilos. This suggests to many that Luke was not recording first-hand impressions but compiling the reminiscences of others.

Perhaps the liturgical designation of Luke as an apostle and as one of the Seventy resembles calling St Paul one of the Twelve. "Twelve" and "Seventy" were understood in the early Church as designations of office rather than as historical references.

Luke as an Iconographer

In the sixth century Theodore, a reader at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, compiled a history from various sources. In it he describes an image of the Theotokos which Empress Eudoxia found in Jerusalem and sent to Constantinople. This may have given rise to the belief, first recorded in the ninth century, that St Luke had painted the first icon of the Theotokos. The Hodigitria icon (she who shows the way), which was prized in the capital until it was lost in the Ottoman invasion, was attributed to him.

A Byzantine icon of the Theotokos revered in Rome was long held to be by St. Luke, but has been shown to be no earlier than the fifth century in origin. Called "Salus Populi Romani" (the salvation of the Roman people), it is enshrined in the Basilica of St. Mary Major and has been visited frequently by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

The Death of St. Luke

We know little about St. Luke after the martyrdom of St Paul. He is said to have returned to Asia Minor, preaching in the Churches there, in Greece and the Balkans. According to a fairly early tradition he died in Boeotia, a district in central Greece, and was buried in Thebes, its principal city. After the founding of Constantinople, when many well-known relics were brought to the capital, St Luke's body was taken to Constantinople during the reign of the Emperor Constantius, son of St Constantine the Great.

At some time before 1187 – the circumstances are not known – the body was brought to Padua, Italy and enshrined in Padua's Church of St. Justina where it remains. In 1992 the Orthodox Metropolitan of Thebes requested a portion of the relics from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Padua. Carbon-14 dating and other tests were carried out on the body and on the reputed skull of St Luke enshrined at St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague. The skull and the body were demonstrated to be that of a single individual from Syria who died sometime after AD 72. The Bishop of Padua sent to Thebes the rib closest to the heart which was then reburied in the original tomb of St. Luke.

In December, 1997 the tomb began exuding myrrh and since then the interior of the tomb has been fragrant.

In Praise of St. Luke

What shall I call you, O divinely-inspired Apostle Luke? A river flowing to us from Paradise? The Ark of the Covenant established by Christ? A star shining forth the supreme Light? A radiance illuming the Church of God? A table of the Bread of Life and a divine Chalice? Intercede for the salvation of our souls.

What shall I call you, O glorious Apostle Luke? An attentive physician who heals souls and bodies with the treasures of Heaven's graces? A collaborator and traveling companion of Paul? The writer of the Acts of the Apostles, O holy Luke? There are many names for your many qualities. Intercede for the salvation of our souls.

What shall I call you, O divine preacher Luke? A disciple who gave us the good news of Christ? A physician through whom our souls are healed of their passions? A radiance shining the supreme Light? The solid foundation of the Faith who wrote an account of the all-holy Gospel for our sake? Intercede for the salvation of our souls.

O holy apostle of Christ, whose divine teachings you relate, foundation stone of the Church: truly, by your preaching, you have drawn back from the abyss of perdition the hearts darkened by ignorance. You save them from the violence of the stormy waves, O you who were both the companion and imitator of Paul, the Vessel of Election. O wondrous Luke, we entreat you, O jewel of the Antiochians: intercede before the Savior, our God, for the faithful who celebrate your sacred memory.

Stichera at Vespers

October 23 – St James, Brother of the Lord

Who Is the Brother of the Lord?

THE NEW TESTAMENT MAKES MENTION of three important disciples of Christ named James. The first, James the son of Zebedee, was one of the first called. The Gospel records that, after calling Peter and Andrew, Jesus "*…saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and followed Him*" (Mt 4:21-22). This James, along with Peter and John, would be the closest of Jesus' disciples. He chose them to be with Him at His

transfiguration and also in the garden after the Last Supper. James the son of Zebedee would be the first apostle to die for Christ (Acts 12:3). He is commemorated on April 30.

The second James among the Twelve would be the son of Alphaeus (Mt 10:3). The Gospels record only his name and nothing more about him is recorded in the Scriptures. St Hippolytus of Rome wrote in the early third century that "James the son of Alphaeus, when preaching in Jerusalem, was stoned to death by the Jews, and was buried there beside the temple." Here Hippolytus repeats a story from the second-century writer Hegesippus concerning the death of the third James, whom St Paul calls "the Lord's brother" (Gal 1:19). This confusion has persisted in the West and these two disciples are often considered to be the same. In the Byzantine .Churches this James is remembered on October 9

This third James was not one of the Twelve, but played a very prominent role among the first Christians because of his family relationship to Jesus (see Mk 6:3). His connection with the Lord has been a subject of much discussion and controversy among Christians of all ages. Some early sects held that James was Jesus' younger brother, the son of Joseph and Mary. St Jerome, insisting that Mary was ever a virgin, taught that James was Jesus' cousin, saying that "brother" here meant "relative." The more common teaching in the East – recorded in the second-century *Protoevangelium of James* – is that James is the older half-brother of Jesus, Joseph's son by an earlier marriage. Thus icons often portray a teen-aged James helping Joseph on the flight into Egypt.

The Gospels record that at first Jesus' family was skeptical when He began His public ministry. They were not among His disciples and Jesus even contrasted them to the spiritual family of His disciples (see Mt 12:46-50). There is no reason to think that James' reaction to Jesus was any different from that of His other relatives.

St Paul gives us the first indications that things were to change drastically. He reports that the risen Christ appeared to James (1 Cor 15:7), making him, like the Twelve and the women, an eye-witness to the resurrection. Presumably James and the rest of his family now accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Acts 1:14 places them among Jesus' disciples in the upper room after His ascension. James and Jesus' other relatives were counted quickly as among the foremost members of the Church (see 1 Cor 9:5).

James as the oldest of his brothers was presumably the head of the family and a logical choice to be the leader of the Jerusalem Church. Peter and the Twelve were "apostles" – sent forth throughout the world – while James remained at the center of the local community. He figures importantly in the Acts of the Apostles as the head of the local Church, the foremost representative of the native Judean believers. For this reason he has come to be known as the first bishop of Jerusalem.

This James was also identified quite early as the author of the General Epistle of James. This New Testament book has been compared to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, aspects of which he repeats in a Christian context:

- If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror who observes himself, goes away and immediately forgets what kind of man he was (Jas 1:22-23).

- If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless (Jas 1:26).

- If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food and some of you say to them 'Depart in peace, be warm and filled" but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what good is it? (Jas 2:15-16)
- You believe that there is one God. You do well, but even the demons believe – and they tremble! (Jas 2:19)

We find several familiar elements in our liturgy drawn from the Epistle of James:
This exclamation is uttered in almost every Divine Liturgy: "Every good gift and every perfect grace is from above and comes down from the Father of lights…" (Jas 1:17).

We also see from this text that the apostolic Church performed what we call the mystery of holy unction: anointing of the sick by the elders (presbyters) of the Church.

The first documents of the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Jerusalem Church that we have date from the fourth century AD. Even then this Church identified its Liturgy with St James the Lord's Brother. The model Liturgy for the Church in the Roman-ruled Middle East, the Liturgy of St James is still used in the Syriac Churches of Antioch. A Greek form is offered on St James' feast days in many Byzantine Churches.

James came to be so known for his righteousness that he was nicknamed James the Just. His reputation for righteousness was such that the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius, in enumerating the reasons for the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD 135, says that the Lord chastised the Jews, among other things, for the murder of the righteous James. James is said to have been stoned near the temple at the urging of the Sanhedrin and buried nearby.

In 2002 a first century ossuary or burial box from Jerusalem was displayed in a Canadian museum. Its inscription reads, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." This inscription has been seen by some scholars as a later addition; if so it would at least attest to the faith of the Jerusalem Christians that James was the half-brother of Jesus, as the Eastern Churches continue to hold.

In the Byzantine Churches this James is chiefly remembered as the Brother of the Lord on the Sunday following the celebration of Christ's Nativity. His martyrdom is commemorated on .October 23

Entrance Hymn at the Liturgy of St James

Let all mortal flesh be silent, and stand with fear and trembling, and meditate nothing earthly within itself.

For the King of kings and Lord of lords, Christ our God, comes forward to be sacrificed, and to be given as food to the faithful.

And the bands of angels go before Him with every power and dominion, the many-eyed cherubim, and the six-winged seraphim, covering their faces, and crying aloud the hymn: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

October 26 – St Demetrius the Myrobelite

St Demetrius and the "Armor of God"

GREAT ARE THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS of faith!" This exclamation is heard several times each year" as we remember the exploits of spiritual giants like the three young Hebrews who survived the fiery furnace in Babylon (Dan 3) or the Great-martyr Theodore the Recruit who suffered in Asia Minor in the early fourth century. The latter's namesake, Theodore the General is described as fighting courageously "with the weapons of faith" (troparion) and "the Word of God as a .spear" (kondakion)

These references and others like them allude to the imagery employed by St Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians. While he affirms that we are saved through faith in Christ's work, not our own, he encourages us to actively don the "*whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil*" (Eph 6:11). St Paul goes on to expand on this image telling us to "*Stand, therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit , which us the word of God*" (Eph 6:14-17).

This martial theme is echoed again and again in the stories of martyrs and confessors who stood firm to profess their faith before those who opposed it. It is shown for in a particularly graphic way in the story of the Great Martyr Demetrius of Thessalonika and his companion, the martyr Nestor, commemorated respectively on October 26 and 27.

Demetrius the Prayer-Warrior

The power of Demetrius' faith is told in the traditional story of his vicarious defeat of the gladiator Lyaeus, recorded in the ninth-century version of the saint's life by Anastasius the Librarian. Demetrius, a young but dynamic Christian, had won the enmity of some leading pagans in the city for converting a number of young people to Christ. He was denounced for his faith during a celebration in honor of the Eastern Roman emperor, Maximian, and imprisoned in the baths near the palace and the arena where games and sacrifices were to be held in homage to the emperor.

As part of the festivities, Maximian offered a rich reward to any Thessalonian who would battle one-on-one with his prize gladiator, Lyaeus. Another young Christian, Nestor, visited Demetrius in prison and asked for his spiritual support in accepting the challenge to fight Lyaeus.

At first the emperor was reluctant to pit the gladiator against the youth. "Out of pity for your youth I will reward you just for your daring," the emperor is said to have told Nestor. "Take my gift and keep your life, but do not hurl yourself against Lyaeus who had defeated many more powerful than you."

Relying on Demetrius' prayers, Nestor fought and defeated Lyaeus. The emperor, hearing Nestor invoke Christ, was enraged. Rather than reward him, the emperor had both Nestor and Demetrius slain.

According to the earliest existing sources, St Demitrius was born in Thessalonika to a senatorial family in AD 270. Our earliest source, a fourth-century Syriac translation of the horologion, describes Demetrius as stabbed to death with a spear in the year 306.

According to an early account of his death, Loupos, a servant of St. Demetrius, after taking proper care of the body, took the saint's neckscarf, having collected the soil soaked with his blood in it. Taking also the royal ring, which the saint was wearing on his hand, and dipping it in his holy blood, Loupos was able to accomplish many miracles of healing through it.

An oratory was established on the site of the saint's martyrdom and a memorial erected in it. The saint's relics were concealed beneath it lest they be taken and the city lose its protector. When they began exuding fragrant myrrh in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the tomb was unearthed and the saint came to be called Demetrius the Myrobelite (myrrh-gusher).

Demetrius' aid was often invoked over the years as the defender of Thessalonika. Beginning in the sixth century the city was frequently attacked by neighboring Slavic tribes. The city's Christians credited its survival from both invaders and natural disasters to his prayers and he is considered the patron of Thessalonika to this day.

Originally depicted holding a cross or the spear by which he was martyred, St Demetrius is now often shown astride a horse, clad in the "armor of God," either defending the city of Thessalonika from invaders or slaying the gladiator whom Nestor killed, symbolizing the power of Demetrius' prayers for Nestor as he entered combat.

The Basilica of St Demetrius

The first shrine honoring the saint was a small oratory, built shortly after the liberation of Christians in AD 313 on the ruins of the Roman baths where Demetrius had been held captive. In the fifth century, the eparch Leontios constructed a large, three-aisled basilica on the same site; this church burned down in the seventh century. Shortly thereafter, a five-aisled basilica was erected. Converted into a mosque in 1493, it was restored to Christian worship in 1912 but was again destroyed in the great fire of 1917. It was rebuilt and rededicated in 1949.

During the twentieth century reconstruction of the basilica workers found beneath the altar the remains of the original oratory and the Roman baths where Demetrius was killed. An earthen vessel containing soil and human blood as well as a marble basin used for gathering the myrrh from his grave were discovered there as well. Some seventh and eighth century frescoes also survived the fire and are now housed in the church's crypt-museum.

The world has found in you a great champion in time of peril, as you emerged the victor in routing the barbarians. For as you brought to naught the boasts of Lyaios, imparting courage to Nestor in the arena, in like manner, O holy Great Martyr Demetrios, invoke Christ God for us, that He may grant us His great mercy.

Troparion, October 26

Streaming with your own blood, O Demetrios, you were offered to the life-giving Christ, who had poured out His own precious blood for you. He gave you a share in His glory, making you an heir of His Kingdom, for you triumphed in your combat with the evil one and frustrated all his terrible temptations.

Rejoice in the Lord, O city of Thessalonica! Exult and dance with joy, O you who were the home of the glorious athlete Demetrios, that witness to the truth, whom you possess as a treasure in your midst. Rejoice in his miracles, at the sight of his healings! Behold him who repels the assaults of the pagans; and in thanksgiving, say to the Savior, "O Lord, glory to You!"

Stikhera at Vespers, October 26

Let us venerate Demetrios, who by a lance inherited the saving grace of Christ's side, which was pierced by a lance, from which the Savior caused to flow for us the waters of life and immortality. Crowned by most wise teachings, this martyr ran the perfect race of his passion by his blood, and he shines with miracles throughout the whole world. He is the imitator of the Master, the friend to the poor, the defender of Thessalonica from all dangers. Celebrating his annual memorial, we glorify Christ our God who works healing for all through him.

Stikhos at Orthros,October 26

Faithful People Able to Teach Others (2 Tim 2:1-10)

IN BYZANTINE CHURCHES 2 Timothy 2:1-10 is often read when one or another martyr is commemorated. When this epistle was written, first-century Christians were already experiencing attacks – often violent – in various parts of the Mediterranean world. A Church leader had to be prepared to "*endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ*" (2 Tm 2:3).

What may surprise us is the first part of St Paul's injunction: "*the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (v. 2)**.** The first requirement for a Church under arrack is to prepare a new generation of leaders ***who can instruct others in turn***.

A Lesson from the Middle East

For many generations Church life in the ancient patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem was relatively stable. Christians had a recognized, if subservient, civil identity under Turkish rule and each community ordered its own life according to its respective statutes. They suffered periodic attacks by Muslims or Druze, but these assaults did not affect their inner identity.

That situation changed in the nineteenth century for Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church. That century saw a growing Western presence in Egypt which brought prosperity which Coptic businessmen had not seen for centuries. It also brought other Christians to settle in the country – Roman Catholics from Italy, Orthodox and Melkites from Greece, Syria and Lebanon – whose clergy seemed better educated than their Coptic counterparts. More significantly, Protestant missionaries began making inroads among the Copts while some Copts formed the Coptic Catholic Church with the blessings of Rome. The response of the Coptic Orthodox patriarch was to make the training of new leaders on all levels a matter of prime importance to their Church.

Prior to 1850 the Coptic Church handed on its faith and tradition in a somewhat haphazard fashion, just as other Churches had done in placid times. Future priests observed their elders and learned hymns and rituals by observation and rote. In response to the challenge of their more effective neighbors, the Copts developed strong clergy formation programs over the next fifty years. This included, but was not limited to the training of priests. Before anything else, they trained chanters, catechists and deacons precisely in order to teach others the faith and traditions of their Church.

Over the next century some of these chanters and deacons became priests. Perhaps more significantly, the readers and catechists – all with their own professions in the world – turned

toward monasticism and revitalized monastic life in the country where it all began. Today the Coptic Orthodox Church is the strongest Church, spiritually speaking, in the Middle East. It has withstood Muslim violence despite the government's hands-off treatment of Islamic fundamentalists. Where Copts have emigrated to the West, they quickly established churches at a surprising rate. While other Eastern Churches have taken several generations to begin using English in their liturgical services, the Copts began doing so almost immediately, assuring that their young people, many of whom were trained as "servants" (readers, etc.), would have a place in the life of their Church.

Today each Coptic diocese in the United States has an elaborate and extended training program for "servants." Participation is expected and laziness is not tolerated. While other Eastern Churches lament poor Sunday School attendance, Coptic youth are training as "servants" over and above their Sunday School classes, beginning in the fourth and fifth grades. While other Eastern Churches resist imposing any standards for ministry in the Church, the Copts are more than able to maintain quality programs, the fruit of 150 years in the spirit of 2 Tim 2:2.

Training in the Coptic Church Today

Many of us would be shocked to see how seriously St Paul's advice to Timothy has been taken in the Coptic Church. The following general guidelines from their Southern U.S. diocese show how seriously this Church takes training its "servants":

"The Servants Prep Program is a 3-year program as established by our Diocese. Each disciple must complete all three years to become a qualified servant, carrying and preserving the teachings of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the ministries of the church and in our community.

- Class is every Friday from 7:30 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. There will also be Saturday retreats/ seminars. Disciples are expected to attend these events.
- There will be three (3) semesters and periods of evaluations per year: Fall, Spring and Summer. You need to score a minimum of 75% to move to the next semester.

"Every disciple is expected to do their part by establishing their own spiritual canon, working on their personal relationship with the Holy Trinity, and maintaining regular attendance of the Divine Liturgy, partaking of the Eucharist, and confessing.

"The disciple is expected to have a fully integrated Orthodox Christian life, which means being consistent in behavior across all aspects of life (church, work, family, social life, etc.) and striving to live a life of purity and holiness pleasing to our Lord."

Serving in Our Churches

The experience of our Churches today is similar to that of the Coptic Church in some respects. Most of our churches, like theirs, were founded by immigrants. Unlike them, we spent many years acclimating to our society in negative ways. Churches were westernized in the belief that this made them more acceptable in Western eyes. As a result many people had little idea of their own Tradition. Many confused their grandparents' ethnic customs with the Church's Tradition.

We then went through a period in which people relearned the basics of their Tradition. Those who have done so can relate comfortably to the Eastern Christian traditions of prayer and fasting

which a previous generation had lost. It is time to move to the next step: training young people as readers, chanters and catechists to the degree that they can train others in turn.

The optimum time to begin bringing people into ministry, particularly the liturgical ministry, is during the middle school years. It is a time for growing self-confidence and before young people get involved with high school activities, jobs, and the like. They have sat in the pew long enough – they are ready to take on some form of service.

Incorporating young people into already existing structures for church ministry may also address a long time problem in many churches. Young people are less likely than some of their elders to turn what should be roles of service into their personal place in the spotlight. Young people may be more open to see reading or singing in church as selfless ministries, learning to sing "without envy.". As the Coptic Pope Athanasius II wrote in the sixth century, "They [chanters] also teach others how to sing without envy... If the chanters are not singing with the Holy Spirit, let them not sing".

First Sunday in November – The Holy Unmercenaries

ON THE FIRST SUNDAY in November a number of Byzantine Churches keep a special remembrance (Synaxis) for All the Unmercenary Healers: those who cared for the sick or aged in the spirit of Christ, without concern for gain. These physicians and other medical workers understood their skills in the spirit of St Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts ("*To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good*" – 1 Cor 12:7).

A Christian's skills are given, according to Paul, not simply to enhance the person who receives them but chiefly to benefit the entire Body of Christ. St Paul lists several of these spiritual gifts: "*To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*" (1 Cor 12:8-11). Any of these gifts – and of the countless others manifested in the Church – is God's gift to the entire Church given through the one who manifests them.

The Unmercenary Physicians adopted this teaching as the guiding principle of their professional lives to a heroic degree. In an age when health care, as rudimentary as it often was, was exclusively for those who could afford it, the Unmercenaries stood out by their compassionate attention to the sick poor. When Christians were still suspect in the pagan Roman Empire, the witness of Holy Unmercenaries led people to see that Christians were living by a higher standard than the leaders of their own culture. Not surprisingly, Unmercenaries took the occasion of caring for the sick as opportunities for preaching the Gospel as well. The ideal of physicians serving without pay for Christ inspired many in the Church to follow their example.

The Great Martyr Panteleimon

Front and center in the icon of the Holy Unmercenaries is the most revered of these saints in the Christian East, St Panteleimon. He was converted to the Christian faith by St Hermolaus, one of the survivors of the great persecution in Nicomedia. Panteleimon achieved renown by tending without expecting payment to wounded and imprisoned Christians in Nicomedia during the last Great Persecution of Christians in the fourth century. Panteleimon effected many cures by prayer alone which brought him the love of his fellow-Christians and the unwanted attention of the imperial authorities. Executed by order of Emperor Maximian on July 27, 305 St Panteleimon is remembered on that day in the Byzantine calendar.

Cosmas and Damian

The hymns for our feast of the Unmercenaries speak of "three pairs of divinely wise saints Cosmas and Damian, who shared the same names and the same ways" (Verse at the Lamp-lighting Psalms). Two of these pairs of brothers were martyred, one at Rome and the other at Aegea (Ajass today) in the region of Cilicia.

The other Cosmas and Damian, who lived in the third century, came from Asia Minor but lived and ministered to the poor in Mesopotamia where they reposed in peace. After their pagan father's death, their Christian mother Theodotia raised them in the faith and saw to their medical education. Under her guidance they used their medical knowledge to heal the sick without expecting any payment. Miracles accompanied their activity in this life and were frequently said to take place at their tomb in the city of Cyrrhus, capital of the Roman province. An imposing basilica was built over their tomb; its ruins may still be seen there.

In the sixth century Emperor Justinian sumptuously restored the city in the saints' honor and erected an important church in Constantinople dedicated to them, which became a celebrated place for pilgrimage.

About the same time a basilica was constructed in Rome in honor of the Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian of Rome (July 1). This church still exists and contains some remarkable mosaics and frescos from before the era of iconoclasm. Raised in a Christian family, these brothers flourished in the late third century at Rome, where they became known for their skill at healing the sick. Since they cared for Christians and non-Christians alike, they became known in the wider community and attracted many to the Church. Accused of sorcery before Emperor Carinus (282-285), they rejected the charge: "We have done evil to no one, we are not involved with the magic or sorcery of which you accuse us. We treat the infirm by the power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and we take no payment for rendering aid to the sick, because our Lord commanded His disciples, '*Freely you have received, freely give*' (Mt. 10: 8)." These saints are commemorated in the Canon of the Roman Mass and in the Litany of the Saints, some of the oldest Western prayers still in use.

The last set of brothers came from the Roman province of Arabia (parts of Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia today). They practiced their art in Aegea on what is now the coast of Turkey. They were executed along with their brothers Anthimus, Leontius, and Euprepius during the persecution of Diocletian at the end of the third century.

Devotion to all these Unmercenaries spread from the place of their death throughout the empire.

Other Unmercenaries

Among the twenty saints honored on this feast are St Sampson the Hospitable (June 27), an Unmercenary Healer, who on his parents' deaths, began taking in the poor, sick and homeless. The patriarch of Constantinople ordained him a priest and the emperor established a hospice for the sick poor and entrusted it to him.

Other saints commemorated today include martyred physicians Luke the Evangelist (October 18) and Diomedes of Tarsus (August 16). Other saints whose tombs became sources of miraculous healings like St Antipas (April 11) and St Spyridon (December 12) are also commemorated.

God continues to be glorified by unmercenary healers. Some of them, like the sainted Mother Theresa of Kalikut, are known all over the world. Others, like St Luke of Simferopol, the unmercenary physician who became a Ukrainian Orthodox bishop during the worst days of Communist persecutions, are not as widely known. They all have received gifts of healing and all have shared these gifts as freely as they had received them from God.

Today we praise the blessed choir of the holy unmercenary physicians: the Apostle and Evangelist Luke, the excellent healer of the infirm; the most honored hieromartyrs Antipas, Charalampos and Blaise, Spyridon and Modestus, the all-splendid luminaries of the Church; the three pairs of divinely wise saints Cosmas and Damian, who shared the same names and the same ways; Cyrus and the glorious John; the divine Panteleimon and Hermolaus; Diomedes and Sampson; together with Mocius, Photius and Anicetas, Artemius, Thalalxus and Tryphon.

(*Sticheron at Lord to You I call…*)

November 8 – Synaxis of the Chief Commanders, the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, and of the Other Bodiless Powers

A FEW YEARS AGO a Greek pilot had this harrowing experience. In mid-air his plane experienced system failure. The instruments disengaged, the engines cut out and there was nowhere to go but down. Suddenly the pilot saw the holy archangel Michael appear beneath the wings, holding them aloft. He couldn't believe it. St. Michael guided the plane to safety, then vanished.

In our culture there is no room for incorporeal powers such as angels. We class them as myths, along with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. Their tales may provide pleasantly distracting entertainment, but we "know" that only the corporeal, the physical is real.

The Church, based on the witness of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, insists that incorporeal powers – angels – are very real, although generally unseen. They are created, as we are, but with none of the limitations our physical nature imposes on us. The angels are the invisible creation we mention in the Nicene Creed; yet they are not faceless forces: they are individuals differing according to their rank and function.

The great number of human beings who inhabit only this planet is nothing compared to the number of angels who inhabit the universe. As St Cyril of Jerusalem writes, "Imagine how great in number is the Roman people. Imagine how great in number are the other peoples who now exist and how many more must have died! Imagine how many have been buried in a century or in a thousand years. Imagine all mankind from Adam to the present day. Great is their number, but it is small in comparison with the angels."

We find the presence of angels recorded throughout the Old and the New Testaments. The prophet Isaiah saw seraphim before God's throne (Is 6:2) and the prophet Ezechiel saw the cherubim (Ez 10:8). The prophet Daniel saw a thousand thousand ministering to God with ten thousand times ten thousand standing before God (Dan 9 and 10). As we say in the Divine Liturgy, "There stand before You thousands of archangels and myriads of angels, cherubim and seraphim… singing, proclaiming, shouting the hymn of victory and saying 'Holy!'"

The highest in rank of the heavenly powers who minister among us are the holy archangels Michael and Gabriel. Mentioned in several books of the Bible, they are referred to in our Church as the "captains" or "commanders" of the heavenly hosts. In the apocalyptic Book of Daniel Gabriel is described as coming to Daniel "*in rapid flight at the time of the evening sacrifice*" (Dan 9:21). He prophesied that in the last days Michael, "*the guardian of your people*" (Dan 12:1) would defend and deliver from their enemies "*everyone who is found written in the book*." Thus in icons Gabriel is usually depicted as winged while Michael is clothed in a military .uniform

The angel Gabriel appears before Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Forerunner and before the Theotokos to announce the birth of Christ. There are angels at His birth in Bethlehem and at His tomb in Jerusalem. Angels populate the garden in the Book of Genesis (Gen 3:24) and the heavens in the Book of Revelation. We call on them in the psalms to protect and help us and to lead us in blessing the Lord.

A Synaxis for the Heavenly Powers

On November 8 the Byzantine Churches celebrate a synaxis (assembly) in honor of the commanders of the heavenly hosts, Michael and Gabriel, along with all the heavenly powers. This feast was first observed in a church at the thermal baths of the Emperor Arcadius in Constantinople and spread from there throughout the Christian East as the principal commemoration of the incorporeal powers.

Another feast of St. Michael is kept on September 6 remembering the miraculous spring at Chonae in Asia Minor. A sanctuary dedicated to the Archangel had been erected by local Christians. Pagans sought to destroy it by diverting a stream from a nearby gorge against it; however a lightning strike split a massive rock diverting the stream again and preserving the shrine. Believers attributed the lightning to St Michael and considered the diverted waters forever sanctified.

Other Angels in the Tradition

There are a number of other angels named in Christian tradition, not to mention those in Jewish or Islamic lore. The Book of Tobit, found in the Greek Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Masoretic text, speaks of the angel ***Raphael***, who identifies himself as "*one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the glory of the Lord*" (Tob 12:15). Thus seven angels are often depicted in icons wearing priestly vestments.

The seven are named in 1 Enoch 20, a book highly esteemed by first-century Christians and still regarded as canonical Scripture in the Ethiopian Church. Besides ***Michael***, ***Gabriel*** and ***Raphael*** it lists ***Uriel, Remiel*** (Jeremiel), ***Sariel*** (Selaphiel) and ***Raguel***. Uriel and Remiel are also mentioned in 2 Esdras 4, another early work held to be canonical in some Churches. Uriel and Remiel were sent to explain to Ezra the signs of the times in which he lived. The presence of the archangels in our world was generally thought to indicate an approaching apocalyptic age.

Hail, Gabriel, announcer of the Incarnation of God! Hail, Michael, chief Captain of the bodiless hierarchies, who cry aloud, "Holy, holy, holy are You, O our Mighty God!"

From the Canon, November 8

Dionysius and the Angels

In the late sixth century a certain Dionysios, thought to be a Syrian pupil of the Greek philosopher Proclus, composed a number of works systematizing Scriptural teaching in a philosophical framework. For centuries he was confused with Dionysius the Areopagite, an Athenian convert of St Paul, and even St Denys of Paris. Since the nineteenth century he has been called by scholars Pseudo-Dionysius.

Dionysios' *Celestial Hierarchies* arranged the Scriptural names for the incorporeal powers in a specific order, the nine "ranks" of spiritual beings in three "choirs": those closest to God (thrones, cherubim and seraphim), those closest to us (angels, archangels and principalities) and those in between (authorities, dominions and powers). The names are found in Scripture:

- ***Cherubim*** (Gen 3; Ps 80 & 99; Ez 10)
- ***Seraphim*** (Is 6)
- ***Archangels*** (1 Thess 4; Jude)
- ***Angels*** (Rom 8; 1 Pt 3)

- ***Thrones, Authorities, Principalities and Dominions*** (Eph 1, 3; Col 1)
- ***Powers*** (Rom 8; Eph 1).

Dionysios felt that this list was far from exhaustive. "How many ranks of heavenly beings there are, what their nature is and how the mystery of holy authority is ordered among them only God can know in detail…. All that we can say about this is what God has revealed to us through them themselves."

November 13 – St John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople

OF ALL THE SAINTS on our Church calendar there is none – apart from the Theotokos and some biblical figures – with the name recognition of St. John Chrysostom. Since the Divine Liturgy bearing his name is our most frequently served eucharistic rite, most Byzantine Christians, Catholic and Orthodox, know his name, even if they know little else about him.

John was born in 349 to a well-placed family in Antioch, then the capital both of the province of Syria and of the imperial diocese called "the East." His mother was certainly a Christian; historians are not so sure about his father. In any event, John's father died shortly after the boy's birth and he was raised by his mother as a Christian. He was given the usual classical education of his day and was apprenticed to a noted orator, Libanius, probably to prepare him for entering the civil service like his father. Libanius would later call John his most apt pupil.

John and the Church of Antioch

In fourth-century Antioch the children of Christians were considered catechumens from birth, but often baptized only later in life. John was baptized after completing his studies and attached himself, not to the civil service but to the household of the bishop, Meletios of Antioch. At the same time he frequented the ascetic school (*asketerion*) of Diodoros as did many serious young Christians. After about three years in the bishop's household, John was ordained as a reader. The ideals of monasticism had made a great impact on the Church in Syria, including John. When it seemed that the bishop was intent on making John a priest, he left the city and lived among the ascetics in the mountains. John felt that he was unworthy of the priesthood, as he would describe in his essay *On the Priesthood*. Since the Church of Antioch was at that time divided among rival groups and theologies, John may have felt that his priesthood would have been bogged down by these controversies and rivalries. John spent about two years as a hermit (375-377) but his ascetical rigors affected his health and he was obliged to return to the city.

Back in Antioch John resumed his place among the clergy, eventually becoming a deacon (381) and then a priest (386). Over the next twelve years John became widely known as a preacher, delivering lengthy Scriptural commentaries which earned him the nickname *Chrysostomos* (golden-mouhed). John became responsble for the catechumenate; many of the instructions he delivered have been preserved. John also preached regular series of homilies commenting on

biblical books verse-by-verse. It may be that the Antiochian Church did not have prescribed readings for every day leaving John free to choose his own texts. In any case most of these homiies were preached in the time between Pentecost and the Nativity Fast, when the absence of Church feasts meant that he could focus more freely on the book he had chosen.

Archbishop of Constantinople

In October, 397 John was summoned by the Count of the East and Governor of Antioch to meet him at a martyr's shrine outside the city. Driving toward Tarsus the governor informed John that he had been chosen as archbishop of the imperial capital. The emperor had ordered that John be taken from Antioch quietly lest the people try to prevent him from leaving. The emperor had also convoked a synod to formally elect and then ordain John, but it was clear that John was the emperor's choice.

John's years in Constantinople were filled with strife. John saw himself as the bishop of the people, who grew to love him, rather than as the bishop of the imperial court. Attempting to energize the clergy, he aroused the resentment of many who were content with the status quo. In his concern for the poor he pressured the leading citizens to live more simply so that they could contribute to his works. He infuriated some when he sought to build a leprosarium near their estates and angered others when he sold some treasures which his predecessors had accumulated in order to assist the needy.

John ran afoul of the second-ranking bishop in the empire, Theophilos of Alexandria, for supporting the Egyptian's theological opponents. Finally he lost the favor of the emperor and empress, and a synod arranged by John's enemies sent him into exile in 403 for a number of offenses. He was almost immediately reinstated as the people threatened revolt. John would be exiled again in 404, sent to Abkhazia in the Caucasus, where he died during a forced march under military guard on September 14, 407.

Many in Constantinople refused to accept John's removal and maintained separate communities for 30 years. The schism was finally healed in 438 when, with the emperor's permission, John's relics were brought back to Constantinople and enshrined in the Church of the Holy Apostles. The relics remained there until the Crusaders' sack of Constantinople in 1204 when most of them were taken to Rome. On November 27, 2004 Pope John Paul II returned a number of these relics to the Patriarch of Constantinople. They are enshrined in the Patriarchal Church of St George.

Chrysostom's Liturgy

Most people in today's Byzantine Churches know Chrysostom for two texts. His catechetical homily on the resurrection is read every year on Pascha in Byzantine churches throughout the world. The Divine Liturgy which bears his name was probably the Liturgy used in Antioch when St John was a priest there. Its most important elements – the anaphora and the priest's prayers – are probably Chrysostom's. Other parts like the litanies and troparia are likely of later origin. We

know that Chrysostom encouraged antiphonal singing, such as our antiphons today; this may have taken place before the actual Eucharistic Liturgy as the people waited for the bishop to arrive.

Since St John's homililes could last for two or ever three hours, it is not likely that the liturgical rite was as elaborate as it later became.

On the Divine Liturgy

One of St John Chrysostom's most popular works is the Six Books on the Priesthood*, written while he was a deacon in Antioch. It presents his exalted view of the priesthood and why he felt unworthy of it.*

"Would you also learn from another miracle the exceeding sanctity of this office? Picture Elijah and the vast multitude standing around him, and the sacrifice laid upon the altar of stones, and all the rest of the people hushed into a deep silence while the prophet alone offers up prayer: then the sudden rush of fire from Heaven upon the sacrifice: — these are marvelous things, charged with terror. Now then pass from this scene to the rites which are celebrated in the present day; they are not only marvelous to behold, but transcendent in terror. There stands the priest, not bringing down fire from Heaven, but the Holy Spirit: and he makes prolonged supplication, not that some flame sent down from on high may consume the offerings, but that grace descending on the sacrifice may thereby enlighten the souls of all, and render them more refulgent than silver purified by fire. Who can despise this most awful mystery, unless he is stark mad and senseless?" (*On the Priesthood*, Book III.4)

November 14 – The Holy Apostle Philip

THERE IS VERY LITTLE INFORMATION in the New Testament about any of the apostles apart from the chief apostles, Peter and Paul. The Gospels do tell us something about the apostle Philip. Only mentioned in the other Gospels, Philip has a larger part in the Gospel of John. We read that Philip was one of the first called, when the Lord Jesus was with John the Baptist at the Jordan. "*Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!*' (Jn 1:36). The two followed Jesus and stayed with Him. One of them was Andrew who called his brother, Simon Peter.

John then introduces St Philip: "*The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow Me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph'* (Jn 1:43-45). Philip is thus one of the first called by Christ at the start of His public ministry.

Andrew, Simon and Philip were all Jews from the fishing town of Bethsaida, near Capernaum. None of them were scholars –why, then, did Andrew and Philip have Greek names? Then, as now, tradesmen had to deal with customers of all sorts and that meant learning their languages. Perhaps while Peter was the brother who captained the boats, Andrew was the brother who dealt with the customers, some of whom would have been Greek-speaking.

One incident mentioned in John suggests that Philip too was experienced in commerce. It was Philip to whom Jesus turned when faced with a hungry audience and asked, "*Where shall we buy bread that these may eat*?" (Jn 6:5)

It is both Philip and Andrew whom we later find dealing with "Greeks" (Greek-speaking Jews or proselytes?) who wanted to see Jesus. "Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus" (Jn 12:20-22). Andrew and Philip were comfortable with speaking Greek and they were the followers of Jesus who dealt with Greek-speakers.

John's Gospel mentions one other incident featuring Philip. When Jesus was preparing His disciples for His arrest, "*Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me*?'" (Jn 14:8-10). This incident would be referred to time and again as the early Church developed its understanding of the Trinity.

The Scriptures do not mention Philip in their stories of the early Church. When the Acts of the Apostles speaks of Philip it is referring to Philip the Evangelizer of Samaria, one of the first deacons. A number of later Christian writings confuse the two.

Several non-Scriptural Acts of Philip exist but they all seem to be from later centuries. One common thread in these works is the mention that Philip was martyred in the Roman city of Hierapolis in Phrygia (western Turkey today). This city was a well-known resort in the first century, famous for its thermal baths. There was a church there from the days of the apostles; St Paul mentions it in Col 4:13.

In 2011 archaeologists unearthed a first-century tomb while they were excavating a fourth-century church in Hierapolis. The church had been built over the tomb which had contained the relics of St Philip. The relics were very likely moved from Hierapolis to Constantinople at the end of the sixth century when fire destroyed the shrine. Portions of the relics were later taken to Rome and placed in the newly dedicated Church of St. Philip and St. James where they are enshrined beneath the high altar. Some of St Philip's relics remained in Constantinople until 1204 when they were taken to Cyprus during the Crusader's attack on the city. They are venerated there to this day.

November 15 to December 24 – The Nativity Fast

THE AMERICAN SHOPPING SEASON is at hand. Some people will spend it jostling for bargains; others will pass the time lamenting the commercialization of Christmas. The Eastern Churches, on the other hand, encourage their faithful to prepare for this feast by fasting. Each of these Churches has a pre-Nativity Fast, but each Church observes it to a different degree.

Like the feast of Christ's Nativity itself, this fast originated in the West. In AD 380 the Council of Saragossa in Spain mandated daily church attendance beginning on December 17. Pope St Leo the Great (400-461) described four Fasts, one in each season, "so that over the course of the year we might recognize that we are constantly in need of purification." He indicated that the "winter fast" was to begin when the "ingathering of the crops was complete." In France it was specified in the next century that this Fast begin on November 11, the feast of St Martin; the Fast was called "St Martin's Lent."

The Eastern Churches began observing this Fast between the 6th and 8th centuries. Originally it lasted one week, as in the Armenian Church today. In the eleventh century Pope Christodoulos of Alexandria lengthened it to forty days for the Coptic Church. The Byzantine Church followed suit in the next century. The Syrian Churches (Chaldeans, Indians, etc.) keep it for three to four weeks in December.

Why Do We Fast?

St Simeon of Thessalonika, writing in the fifteenth century, explained the purpose of this Fast in terms of its length. "The Nativity Forty-day Fast represents the fast undertaken by Moses, who—having fasted for forty days and forty nights—received the Commandments of God, written on stone tablets. And we, fasting for forty days, will reflect upon and receive from the Virgin the living Word—not written upon stone, but born, incarnate—and we will commune of His Divine Body." As Moses received the Law after his forty-day fast, we will receive the living Word incarnate at the end of this Fast.

One thread running through this Fast is the ***remembrance of the time before the Incarnation***. Mankind was in one sense disconnected from God, having lost the intimacy with Him which we were meant to have because we were created in His image. Fasting is our way to express our sorrow at man's loss of fellowship with God.

The process of recovering this intimacy with God climaxed with the Incarnation, but was prepared for centuries by the Old Testament prophets. During the Nativity Fast we commemorate the prophets Nahum (12/1), Habakkuk (12/2), Zepheniah (12/3), Daniel and the Three Young Men in the Furnace (12/17). On the second Sunday before the feast we remember all those in sacred history who came before Christ and prepared the way for Him – His ancestors and ours.

When and How Do We Fast?

Each patriarchate and other local Byzantine Church has a slightly different way of keeping this Fast. According to one tradition a person should fast from meat and dairy for the forty days, but only need fast from fish after December 17. Another tradition holds that fish may be eaten throughout the Fast, but only on Saturdays and Sundays.

In Greece and the Middle East it is customary to limit the fast to Tuesdays and Thursdays until December 12 (Greece) or December 19. In the Melkite Church the fast has been shortened to begin on December 10 but to continue uninterrupted after then.

The number of feast days at the beginning of the forty days may account for these practices. Besides the Great Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple (November 21 to 25), we observe feasts in honor of these popular saints: the Apostles Matthew (11/16) and Andrew (11/30), Sts Catherine of Alexandria (11/25), Barbara, and John of Damascus (12/4), Sabbas the Sanctified (12/5) Nicholas the Wonder-worker (12/6), the Maternity of St Anne (12/9), and St Spyridon the Wonderworker (12/12). In addition, of course, we in the U.S. also have the national holiday of Thanksgiving during this time. That doesn't leave much time for fasting!

There are no penitential services appointed for this Fast like those we know during the Great Fast. Greeks, who do not generally do so otherwise, have the custom of serving the Divine Liturgy daily during these forty days. This practice echoes the idea that the Nativity Fast is a joyous fast, celebrating the immanent coming of Christ. Other Churches may serve the Akathist or the Paraclisis to the Theotokos during these days.

Character of the Nativity Fast

Many contemporary Eastern writers have encouraged the observance of the Nativity Fast in contrast to the popular Western "pre-celebration" of Christmas, which focuses on decorating, spending, and partying. They emphasize preparation for the feast in quietness and a simplified way of life. Instead of a harried pursuit of gifts and cards for people who will likely "re-gift" them for the next Christmas party, the Fast enables believers to focus on the mystery of the Incarnation, the "reason for the season."

Many see this Fast as essential for us at this time of the year, to shift our focus from ourselves to others, spending less time worrying about our appearance, our cuisine and our home decor in order to use our time in increased prayer and caring for the poor.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, John X, emphasized the Nativity as the "feast of almsgiving" in which we celebrate and perpetuate Christ's love for mankind. "The Nativity of Christ is primarily the feast of divine dispensation – the feast of charity and of almsgiving... Through acts of mercy, extended to one another and to everyone, no matter what race we belong to, we implore the tender mercies of the divine Child, whose springs of mercies and bounties we will never be able to surpass. As the pious Augustine says, "the lamp of our love toward our neighbors causes the divine compassion to abide in this creation."

Pre-Nativity Hymns from the Menaion

Isaiah, dance for joy: receive the word of God. Prophesy to the Virgin Mary that the bush burning with fire will not be consumed by the radiance of our God. Let Bethlehem be prepared! Let the gates of Eden be opened! Let the Magi come forth to see wrapped in swaddling clothes in

a manger of beasts the salvation which the star has pointed out from above the cave, the life-giving Lord, who saves mankind! (*Vespers, Nov 30*)

Bethlehem, receive Mary, the City of God: in you will be born the Light that never sets. Let the angels stand in wonder in Heaven, and let mankind glorify the Lord on earth! O Magi from Persia, prepare your illustrious gifts! Shepherds, who pass the night in the fields, sing a hymn to the thrice-holy God. Let everything that has breath celebrate the Creator of All. (*Matins, Nov 30*)

O Sion, be happy! Rejoice, O Jerusalem, the city of Christ our God! Welcome the Creator who rests in a manger in the cave. Open your gates, O Jerusalem, and I will enter so that I may see Him who holds all creation in His hand, even though He lies in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. The angels ever praise this life-giving Lord, Who is the only Savior of mankind. (*Vespers, Dec 6*)

November 16 – St Matthew the Evangelist

A Tax Collector Becomes "God's Gift" to the Church

THE FIRST MENTION OF THIS APOSTLE is found in the Gospel of Matthew. As Jesus was leaving Capernaum, "*He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So he arose and followed Him*" (Mt 9:9). Thereafter Matthew is listed as one of the Twelve.

The Gospel continues: "*Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So he arose and followed Him that, He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*" (Mt 9:10-13).

In the Gospels of Mark and Luke the tax collector is called "Levi, son of Alphaeus" and the dinner is held at Levi's house. The three texts tell the same story and so Matthew/Levi is clearly the same person. Why is he given two different names?

There is a clue is the Greek text of Mt where the tax collector is called *Mattheion legomenon* (the one called Matthew – i.e. God's gift). Perhaps Levi the tax collector came to be called "God's gift" (Matthew) in the community of believers. St Jerome thought that Levi had changed his own name; some Eastern commentators had thought that the Lord had changed it.

The first ancient testimony to a Gospel of Matthew comes from the second century Bishop of Hierapolis, Papias. In a work now lost but quoted by others, Papias says that "Matthew composed the sayings [of Jesus] in the Hebrew dialect [of Aramaic]". As a tax collector this apostle would have been literate in both Aramaic and Greek

If Papias is correct, Matthew's original work may have been simply a collection of sayings, written for Jewish Christians who spoke the Palestinian ("Hebrew") dialect of Aramaic, and later incorporated into the Greek narrative we now have.

Our Matthew, although written in Greek, was still written for Jewish Christians. There were many Jews who understood and spoke Greek – it was the universal language of the Mediterranean – and many who no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. It is thought that the Gospel was written in a Jewish Christian community in Syria, probably at Antioch.

St. Irenæus tells us that Matthew preached the Gospel among the Hebrews, St. Clement of Alexandria claiming that he did this for fifteen years. Ancient writers are not unanimous as to the countries evangelized by Matthew, but almost all mention the so-called Ethiopia Secunda to the south of the Caspian Sea (not Ethiopia in Africa but in today's Armenia and Georgia). Some say he also preached in Persia, Macedonia, and Syria.

The relics of St Matthew are entombed in an Armenian monastery in Kyrgyzstan. Other relics are housed in Salerno, Italy. Brought there in 984, they were unearthed in 1080 during an excavation of a Lombard castle. The Cathedral of St Matthew was then built to house them.

Of Hierarchs and Prophets (1 Cor 4:9-16)

THE NEW TESTAMENT TELLS US a great deal about the apostles during Christ's lifetime and the first days of the early Church. With the conversion of St Paul the Scriptures focus on him and his writings; most of the other apostles leave the stage. As a result, we do not have a definitive picture of the role of an apostle in the first-century Church.

We know that the apostles traveled extensively through the Mediterranean world and beyond bringing their eye-witness testimony to all who would hear them. What happened once people believed their word and formed Christian communities is less clear. It later became common to speak of some bishops as "successors" to individual apostles (Peter in Rome, Mark in Alexandria, James in Jerusalem, etc), but there is no clear evidence that apostles functioned as the heads of individual local Churches. This is why all bishops are considered successors of all the apostles.

The practice of St Paul, at least, was to organize a Christian community and then move on, leaving trusted assistants to help it mature. As we learn from St Paul's advice to Timothy (see 1 Tim 3:1-13), bishops and deacons were then to be chosen from the local community after being tested.

Sometimes, however, leaders assume that their followers are ready for leadership before their time. Perhaps this is what happened in Corinth. The chosen leader, Apollos, was being pitted against Paul and Cephas (see 1 Cor 1:12-13). Apollos may have been responsible or he may have

been used by contentious people in conflict with one another. In dealing with the problem St Paul reveals a divide that has reappeared in the Church from time to time.

Hierarchic Order and Prophetic Charism

The New Testament shows that, from the beginning, local Churches were organized around a hierarchy: the bishops and presbyters, assisted by the deacons. These ministries remain at the heart of the historic Churches (Catholic, Orthodox, etc.) today. They are, as it were, the mortar holding the local Church together. By their communion with one another, bishops show that their Churches throughout the world are connected to one another.

The apostles, like the Lord Jesus Himself, had an itinerant ministry. Their role was to proclaim the Gospel of which they were eyewitnesses and to encourage believers in the growing number of local communities in the Roman Empire and beyond. Their ministry was prophetic, accompanied by signs and healings. It was also unique, because the apostles were eye-witnesses to Christ's life, death and resurrection. In that they could have no successors.

In the ages that followed the same two types of ministry continued. The *hierarchical* order of bishops, presbyters and deacons continued to provide the structural pattern to Church life. As the number of local Churches multiplied, bishops were given various designations corresponding to their differing responsibilities. Chor-bishops served the countryside, metropolitans served the towns and cities, the bishop of the principal Church in a province was called archbishop and, later, patriarch. These bishops came together in synods from time to time, manifesting the interdependence of each local Church on the others.

The *prophetic* ministry tended to become the province of the monastics. Those who excelled in living the ascetic life, whether as hermits or in monasteries, manifested spiritual gifts which drew believers to join them in their way of life or, at least, to ask for their prayers and counsel.

In many cases the bishops relied on the monastics for their spiritual assistance and often looked to them to provide members of the clergy, particularly in remote areas. Sometimes, however, there were conflicts. Bishops, responsible for the care of the local Churches, tended to spend money they received on building churches, buying land and enhancing the treasury of their Church. Ascetics, on the other hand, would use whatever they were given to care for the sick and the needy, often criticizing more prosperous Christians (including bishops) for not doing the same. Prophets and hierarchs each were essential to the life of the Church; sometimes they exercised their particular gift by challenging one another.

The Elder in the Church Today

The English word "elder" is generally used to translate two different Greek terms, each referring to a different ministry in the Church. The first, *presbyter*, refers to the sacramental order in the

Church's hierarchy which surrounds and assists the bishop. *Priest*, the word we use for this order, is simply a contraction of the Greek term.

The second word, *geron*, (literally "old man") refers to the spiritual guide, usually but not exclusively, a monk or a nun. The elder or eldress experienced in the spiritual life has the prophetic charism of knowing God by experience and, because of this experience, being able to guide others in their journey to God. While the hierarchical order of bishop, presbyters and deacons is found in every authentic local Church today, the ministry of charismatic elder is less common.

The lives of the Fathers and Mothers of the Egyptian desert contain numerous stories of early elders and eldresses. Successive generations have seen great elders arise in the Church such as Sts. John Moschos and Sophronios of Jerusalem in sixth-century Palestine, Symeon the Elder and Symeon the New Theologian in eleventh-century Constantinople and Sergius of Radonezh and Seraphim of Sarov in fourteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia respectively. Some today look to ascetics in monastic centers such as Mount Athos as elders for our time.

The spiritual elder or *geron* (in Slavonic, *staretz*) is generally a person with the spiritual gifts necessary to help others in the spiritual life. First of all is the knowledge of God which comes, not from books, but from prayer and direct experience of God. Secondly the spiritual guide must know the inner life of others, a knowledge that may come as a special gift from God.

Some elders manifest signs and uncommon spiritual gifts. One tale of a spiritual guide manifesting such a gift is often told about St Porphyrios, a twentieth-century Greek elder. Once he was visited by a Catholic monk from Italy who had come to learn more about the ascetic life of Athonite monastics. As the story goes, when Elder Porphyrios saw him, without asking him anything, he began to describe this monk's monastery in Italy and their way of life there. He even described a neighboring convent. He saw all the monks and nuns there and mentioned each one of them in specific detail.

The Italian monk was literally dumb-founded because it was the first time in his life that he had met such a man. "If someone had told me about these things; that he had seen and heard these things, I would never believe it," he later said. "How is it possible for this person who lives in Greece to describe our monastery in Northern Italy in detail, to tell me all those details, to tell me about the monks, to tell me about the nuns, each one of them individually?"

Porphyrios attributed this knowledge to God's grace. Popular veneration of this elder was confirmed by the bishops of the Orthodox Church of Greece who canonized Porphyrios in 2013.

November 21 – Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

IT IS PROBABLY SAFE TO SAY that most people would prefer to read a story than an academic treatise. Both forms might be conveying the same point, but a narrative is likely to be more compelling – and more memorable – than a dissertation.

The Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, the Great Feast we celebrate today, rests on such a narrative. The story is found in *The Protoevangelion of James*, a second-century telling of the birth and infancy of the Theotokos. We know that in the first and second centuries AD a number of books were written about Christ and His Mother. Some were accepted by all the local Churches as presenting a true portrait of the Messiah. Others were rejected because the Christ they portrayed was not the one who had been preached by the apostles. In some He was a Gnostic philosopher, in other a magician. We call these "apocryphal gospels" and do not see them as the voice of the Holy Spirit to us. Still other books, *The Protoevangelion of James* among them, were revered by the Christians of their day but not considered canonical Scriptures because their content was not at the heart of the apostolic proclamation or the early Creeds. Their subject matter treated things like Jesus' physical appearance or the early periods of Christ's life not covered in the Gospels. They may be true but not central to our faith.

The Source of This Feast

The prayers and icon of this Feast focus on two elements of the *Protoevangelion* story. In the first, Mary at the age of three is presented to God in the temple at Jerusalem accompanied, as the text reads, "by the daughters of the Hebrews that are undefiled." There "the priest received her, kissed her and blessed her."

After describing the scene, the *Protoevangelion* continues: "And Mary was in the temple of the Lord like a dove that is being nurtured: and she received food from the hand of an angel" (8:1). The image of the Virgin receiving food from an angel, often represented in our icon of the Feast, points to the spiritual environment in which Mary was raised and which would prepare the holy Virgin for her future role as Theotokos.

The second vignette is shown in the upper right hand corner of this icon. There Mary sits in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the Holy of Holies, ministered to by an angel. According to Jewish Law, no one entered the Holy of Holies: "*only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance*" (Heb 9:8). It is unthinkable that a child would be not only allowed there but actually live there as the Protoevangelion avows.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are given a reason why no one was allowed into the Holy of Holies: "*The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning*" (Heb 9:9). By placing Mary in the Holy of Holies, the Protoevangelion is saying that the way into the Holy Place – the presence of God – now is disclosed. It is Christ, who would be incarnate in the womb of this same Mary the Theotokos. For this reason the story and its celebration have been embraced by the Tradition as affirmations of the Gospel.

Mary's coming into the temple is portrayed as an "Entrance" on this feast in the Christian East rather that as a "Presentation" as in the West. This term puts us in mind of things like the "Great Entrance" at our Divine Liturgy or the Entrance Procession in the Western rites. Her coming is not the blessing of an insignificant child given in a "side chapel," as it were, but a festive "prelude" or "overture" inaugurating the main event, the New Testament itself.

Our celebration of this feast focuses on Mary as the temple of the incarnate God, the one for whom the Jerusalem temple was only a prefiguration. After their entry with Christ into Jerusalem His disciples came up to Him to call His attention to the temple and the buildings in its compound. Jesus replied, "'*Do you see all these things?' he asked. 'Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down*'" (Mt 24:2). This feast celebrates the fulfillment of His prophecy. God's people will no longer reach heaven via Jerusalem; rather the heavens have been opened to us and God's temple, the Theotokos, is become for us the way to heaven through her childbearing.

"Hail, Full of Grace"

Perhaps the most popular hymn of this feast is the kontakion, *O katharotatos naos*, which summarizes in a few lines the theology we have been presenting. It reads: "The most pure Temple of the Savior, the most precious and bright bridal chamber – the Virgin, sacred treasury of the glory of God – enters today into the Temple of the Lord, bringing with her the grace of the Most Holy Spirit. Wherefore, the angels of God are singing: "This is the heavenly Tabernacle!" In this hymn two teachings are affirmed. Mary is proclaimed by the angels as "the heavenly tabernacle." The tabernacle, we know, was the portable holy place which the Hebrews brought with them in the desert until they reached the promised land. It was rendered into a more permanent form as the temple. She, not any building, is the holy place where God dwelled.

Secondly we are told that Mary entered the temple "bringing with her the grace of the Most Holy Spirit." People went to the temple to encounter God, to receive His blessings. Mary, instead, brings God's grace with her. She is proclaimed as "full of grace," even as a child, by the angels themselves. This feast is thus for the Eastern Churches what the Immaculate Conception is to the West: a celebration of the holiness of Mary, sanctified from her earliest days by the Most Holy Spirit who dwelt in her.

As we have said it was unthinkable that a child, or anyone for that matter, should enter the Holy of Holies. But it is Mary's rightful place as the woman full of grace who would contain within the Platytera between earth and heaven, the foremost worshipper of the Lord whom she bore.

Mary at Work

Icons of the annunciation often show the Holy Virgin weaving when the angel appeared to her. This vignette, too, is drawn from the *Protoevangelion*, which describes Mary as weaving a curtain for the Jerusalem temple with several other girls. The temple veil was like a giant patchwork quilt with each girl assigned by lots to weave a portion, each using different colors. The Virgin was given the most precious colors, scarlet and true purple.

Our iconography designates these colors to represent divinity. Christ wears a scarlet or purple tunic with a blue cloak over it. This symbolizes that His divinity (scarlet) put on His humanity (blue) in the incarnation. In icons of the Theotokos the colors are reversed. Her humanity (a blue tunic) took on divinity (a scarlet cloak) when she conceived the Lord.

The "Nea" Church

The sixth-century Byzantine Emperor Justinian saw himself as a new Solomon, destined to outdo the Hebrew king of that name in building magnificent temples to the Lord. He rebuilt Jerusalem's church of the Resurrection and gave us the Great Church of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia.

Justinian also built a vast church complex in Jerusalem on the highest point in the city, the New (*Nea*) Church of the Theotokos. Of unprecedented size itself, it was surrounded by many buildings: accommodations for pilgrims, a hospital and a monastery. The principal historian of that age, Procopius, described it as "a shrine with which no other can be compared." Antoninus of Piacenza, who visited it in 570, spoke of "its great congregation of monks, and its guest houses for men and women. In catering for travelers they have a vast number of tables, and more than three thousand beds for the sick."

Archeologists have shown that the Nea was designed to be twice the size of the Jewish temple. Like the temple, the Nea was adorned with cedars of Lebanon. Also like the temple, its entrance was flanked by two elaborately carved red marble columns. As the Theotokos, the new temple, was the *katharotatos naos,* so the Nea would be the ultimate temple built by the new Solomon.

Like the Jewish temple, the Nea would not survive the first millennium, destroyed in wars and earthquakes. The Theotokos, however, remains our heavenly tabernacle in whose womb Christ took flesh.

November 25 – St Catherine of Alexandria

IN THE YEAR 650 THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN sponsored the building of a monastery at Jebel Moussa on the Sinai Peninsula. It was built to enclose the Chapel of the Burning Bush ordered to be built by St. Helena, the mother of St Constantine the Great, at the site where Moses is supposed to have encountered God at the burning bush. The full, official name of the monastery is the Sacred and Imperial Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount of Sinai, but for centuries it has been known as the Monastery of St Catherine.

Justinian's monastery still exists. The unique climate of Sinai has preserved in it some of the oldest Christian manuscripts in the world including the fourth century *Codex Sinaiticus*, a handwritten copy of the Bible. The monastery houses the most important collection of early icons in the world. Many of them look as if they were painted yesterday. The monastery also

cherishes numerous relics, the most revered being the head and the hand of St. Catherine of Alexandria which rest in the monastery church.

In the eighth century the relics of St. Catherine were discovered buried in the ground by an ascetic who lived in the vicinity. They were later transferred to the monastery itself and placed in a sarcophagus near the principal altar. The saint's head and hand remain there to this day, reportedly giving forth a heavenly scent and working countless miracles. Thus the liturgy calls Catherine "the protectress of Sinai" (troparion),

In the eleventh century Simeon of Trier brought a finger of the saint to Rouen. Other relics are found in churches throughout the Mediterranean, in Ethiopia and in India. Devotion to St Catherine thus spread throughout the Christian world.

The relics of Saint Catherine are brought out for the veneration of the faithful on special occasions, at which time each pilgrim is given a silver ring bearing the monogram of the saint. These rings are preserved by pilgrims as a blessing from Saint Catherine. According to one tradition, Catherine had a vision in which she underwent a mystic marriage with Christ, who put a gold ring on her finger. Another version of the tradition says that, when Catherine was praying before a small icon of the Theotokos and Her Son, He turned His head and placed a ring on her finger.

Who Was St. Catherine?

Despite the universal reverence for this saint in all the Churches, important questions about her identity remain unanswered. The first mention of her by name is in the *Menologium Basilianum*, a collection of saints' lives compiled for Emperor Basil II who died in 886, over 500 years after her death. A longer life, by Simeon Metaphrastes, was written in the tenth century and is the source of all later compositions, including the hymns for her feast.

According to Simeon, Catherine was an extremely learned young girl of noble birth who protested the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Maxentius —whose wife and several soldiers she converted — and defeated the most eminent scholars summoned by Maxentius to oppose her. The spiked wheel by which she was sentenced to be killed broke, and she was then beheaded.

In the eighteenth century the Maronite scholar, Joseph Simon Assemani (1687-1768), seeking an earlier mention, identified Catherine with a young Christian noblewoman of Alexandria mentioned in Eusebius' history of the Church, written less than 20 years after the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximinus. This woman was banished for refusing the solicitations of the emperor and suffered the confiscation of her estates.

Others have thought that Catherine is a fictional person, modeled after the neo-Platonist philosopher Hypatia who, according to the fifth-century Christian writer Socrates Scholasticus, "made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time." This woman was killed in 415 by a Christian mob in Alexandria who believed she was influencing the city's prefect against the bishop. This caused a great scandal in the Churches for,

as Socrates observed, “Surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort.”

In the Middle Ages a tradition began to circulate that Hypatia, through her student Synesios the Bishop of Cyrene, became a Christian. According to the local tradition of Denizli in Asia Minor, Bishop Synesios, to show repentance on behalf of Christians for the death of Hypatia, is the one who called a local synod on November 25, 415 after her death, in which he presented a letter of Hypatia saying that she had “a desire to die a Christian” and to be baptized on Holy Saturday of that year. The synod decided to thus honor her memory on November 25th, which became the feast of St. Catherine later on. From this we can deduce that the people of Denizli saw St. Katherine as a baptized version of Hypatia.

A former teacher in Denizli at the end of the nineteenth century wrote that there used to be a church in the village “dedicated to the honor and memory of Hypatia, the philosopher and martyr.” This church celebrated its feast on November 25th “for the Virgin-Martyr Saint Katherine in whose name crowds of believers who lived in the surrounding area would celebrate the wise daughter and rhetor, Hypatia” given a new name by virtue of her “baptism of desire.”

A Woman Philosopher?

Simeon Metaphrastes depicts St Catherine as a highly educated woman, a philosopher skilled in the Alexandrian tradition. Some people think that women emerged into public life only in the modern era. In the Hellenistic culture – and Alexandria was the educational center of the Greco-Roman world – learning and religion were the two fields most open to women. The degree of freedom a woman enjoyed depended largely on her wealth and social status. As the patrician Simeon describes, Catherine would have enjoyed such freedom and opportunity.

A slightly later example of a learned woman is St Macrina the Elder, matriarch of a noble Cappadocian Christian family. Her grandson, St Basil the Great, described her as “the illustrious Macrina, by whom we were taught the words of the most blessed Gregory [the Wonderworker].” That a grandmother would teach her grandchildren religion is not unusual – that a grandmother would pass on to them the deeply philosophical writings of a disciple of Origen is beyond our imagination today.

St. Basil’s sister, Macrina the Younger, was named after her illustrious grandmother. She too was a noted Christian thinker who had considerable influences on her brothers Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. By her time, however, Christian women had a new field of endeavor open to them: monasticism. With another of her brothers, Peter of Sebaste, she devoted her resources to establishing monasteries on the grounds of the family estate.

Like these other learned women, St Catherine is something of a symbol of an age in transition. She lived in great centers of Neoplatonism, a philosophy that was increasingly being mixed with superstition and divination. She died in the last of the great Roman persecutions and, through her relics, became a protectress of monasticism in which the Christian philosophy of theosis would thrive.

November 27 – St James the Persian

A Rich Young Man

THE GOSPELS TELL US LITTLE about the man who approached Jesus to learn how to attain eternal life. Luke (18:18-27) calls him "a ruler;" Matthew (19:16-26) describes him as "a young man." Both agree that he was rich. He was not willing to abandon his status and his wealth to follow Jesus, he became the classic example of how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God if your mind is on wealth and power in the kingdom of this age.

On November 27 the Byzantine Churches remember another rich young man – one who made a very different decision from his Scriptural counterpart. The holy martyr James the Persian lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He was raised a Christian at a time when Christians exercised a measure of freedom in the Persian Empire.

James became a respected and important member of Persian society. He was a military officer under Yisdegerd I and a favorite companion of his son, Bahram. James enjoyed royal favor, wealth and an enviable position in the inner circle of the Persian royal family. He was, in short, a rich young man.

Christianity under Attack

Religion and politics were inseparably entwined in this era. When the Roman Empire persecuted Christians, the Persian Empire welcomed them. Thus when Jerusalem was demolished in the second century many of its Christians crossed the border into the Persian realm.

On the other hand, as Christianity came to be the official religion in the Roman Empire, life became difficult for Christians in Persia. Yisdigerd I, who had at first protected Christians and persecuted Zoroastrians, reversed his policy. The Church of the East was cut off from the Churches in the Roman Empire in the interests of national security.

When Yisdegerd turned against Christianity he began urging the members of his court to abandon the "Roman religion" in favor of the Persian. The king tried hard to estrange James with gifts and gratuities. He chose a good-natured approach, persuading James with benefits and flatteries, rather than with threats and torments. At first James resisted this pressure, but ultimately was seduced by the many generous favors of the ruler and denied Christ. Like the young ruler in the Gospel, James put status and wealth ahead of the Lord.

According to the account in the Great Synaxarion, James' wife and mother, hearing what he had done, wrote to him to this effect: "It was not proper to your nobility to exchange falsehood for the truth; to defraud the faith for the honor of men and temporary rewards, which pass by as a dream and disperse like smoke; and to love the perishable and temporary kingdom, and abandon

immortality and eternity. For this violation you would elect to be cast into the inextinguishable fire and endless torment?… We have been greatly distressed by you and pour forth many tears and, with all our hearts, we pray to the true God not to desert you, as He is compassionate, but to receive your return. … you departed badly; but the Master, whom you denied, will receive you with open arms and rejoicing. If you disdain our advice and tears, when you reach the divine judgment, you will be punished in torments endlessly and your crying will be in vain."

James was moved by his wife and mother and resolved to confess Christ before the Persians. Meanwhile James' onetime friend Bahram had become the emperor on the death of his father Yizdegerd. Bahram V, intensified pressure on Christians to adopt the Persian religion, Zoroastrianism. When the king learned that James had reverted to Christianity, he confronted him and tried to persuade him to return to the Persian religion. When James refused, Bahram invoked their friendship and promised him greater wealth and power than before. Again James refused and the king, in a rage, handed him over to be tortured.

Taking the advice of a more obliging courtier, the king ordered that James be tortured in a public spectacle. His body was slowly dismembered: first his thumb was cut off, then each finger and so on. At each amputation he was encouraged to save his life by renouncing Christ. Instead James answered each time with a prayer. After several hours he was finally beheaded. When the news of this reached Constantinople it caused the Roman emperor to invade Persia, starting the brief Roman-Sassanid War (421-422).

James quickly came to be revered in the Byzantine Churches as James the Persian and among the Latins as St James Intercessus (the Dismembered). The great Armenian cathedral in Jerusalem is dedicated to his memory.

James and the Melkite Church Today

By the sixth century a monastery had been erected in his honor in Qara, a desert town north of Damascus. Abandoned since the death of the last monk in 1930, it was restored and, in 2000, reestablished by the Melkite metropolitan of Homs, Hama and Yabroud, Kyr Ibrahim Nehmé. The monastery is dedicated to the service of Unity of the Christians of the Middle East and in a spirit of openness towards Muslims as well. The monastery was founded as a women's community, but by 2004 a men's monastery has also been established there. These communities include members from various traditions – Melkite Greek Catholic, Maronite, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Syriac Orthodox – and even includes brothers from Muslim background.

Besides the usual practices of traditional monasticism – worship, asceticism and communal life – the communities at St James Monastery are noted for their commitment to Christian unity. While remaining monastics of the Melkite eparchy of Homs, they accord filial honor, to all the Patriarchs of Antioch – Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox

and Syrian Catholic – and from there embark towards ecumenical horizons and loving openness towards the other Churches and religions.

The monastery has been targeted by ISIS during the conflict in Syria. The hegumen, Fr Francis Murad, was kidnapped and killed. The monastery was shelled, but continues to provide charitable assistance to the displaced as best it can.

Troparion (Tone 4) - James the Martyr and scion of Persia drowned the dragon in his blood by his contest: he was dismembered for his faith and became the Savior's trophy-bearer. He intercedes unceasingly for our souls.

Another Troparion (Tone 4) – You astounded all, long-suffering James, by enduring horrible tortures with great patience. As the evil assembly performed the slaughter, you uttered prayers of thanksgiving to the Lord. Through your sufferings you received your crown,
and came to the throne of the heavenly King, Christ God. Entreat Him to save our souls!

Kontakion (Tone 2) – You listened to your wife and considerer the final judgment O courageous James. You spurned the threats and commands of the Persians and your body was pruned like a vine. We praise you, O noble Martyr.

November 30 – St Andrew the First-Called

ONE OF THE MOST REVERED New Testament figures in the Christian East is the Apostle Andrew the First Called. His title comes from the first mention of him in the Gospel of John*: "The next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to Him, 'Rabbi' (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), 'where are You staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus*" (Jn 1:35-42).

The New Testament states that Andrew was the brother of Simon Peter, by which it is inferred that he was likewise a son of Jonah (Mt. 16:17; Jn. 1:42) He was born in Bethsaida on the Sea of Galilee (Jn. 1:44). Both he and his brother Peter were fishermen by trade, hence the tradition that Jesus called them to be his disciples by saying that he will make them "fishers of men" (Greek: ἁλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων, *halieîs anthrōpōn*). At the beginning of Jesus' public life, they were said to have occupied the same house at Capernaum (Mk. 1:21-29).

As disciples of John the Baptist, Andrew and Peter were among those with a firmer faith, ready to make a deeper commitment to God in their lives. And so when they next encountered Jesus back home in their adopted home town of Capernaum (the Gospel calls Andrew a native of Bethsaida), the result should not strike us as odd. "*Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, 'Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.' They immediately left their nets and followed Him*" (Mt 4:18-20). Their undying faith in a difficult world is an inspiration to all Christians.

While Peter, James and John came to be the foremost of Christ's closest followers, Andrew had a prominent place as well.

In the Gospels Andrew is referred to as being present on some important occasions as one of the disciples more closely attached to Jesus. In the Gospel of John he appears as a kind of go-to person for Jesus, bringing people to Him and presumably keeping the crowds at bay. It was Andrew who reported to Jesus about the lad with the five loaves and two fish. When Jesus and His disciples had arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover we are told that, "*Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus*" (Jn 12:20-22). Since both Philip and Andrew had Greek names – not unusual in Galilee since the second or third century BC – it was perhaps natural that these Greek pilgrims approached them.

St Andrew and the Early Church

After Pentecost, at which he was present, there is no further mention of Andrew in the New Testament. Our next reference to this apostle is in Eusebius' *History of the Church* 3,1 written in the fourth century. There he quotes Origen as saying that Andrew brought the Gospel to Scythia.

The region known as Scythia in the ancient world corresponds to portions of today's nations of Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine. For this reason Churches in these nations have a particular devotion to St. Andrew. Ukrainians, for example hold that St Andrew planted a cross on the site of the future city of Kiev, prophesying that a great Christian center would be established there in time. The *Primary Chronicle* of the eleventh-century Monk Nestor added that St. Andrew's apostolic preaching took him as far as Novgorod, making him apostle to Russia as well.

Another city claiming a connection with St Andrew is Constantinople. Founded in the fourth century by St Constantine the Great, this city was built on the site of the earlier town of Byzantium. A work entitled *On the Seventy Apostles of Christ*: and attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (+ 235) identified Stachys, one of the Lord's seventy disciples as the first bishop of Byzantium. Later tradition held that Stachys was given leadership of the Church at Byzantium by St. Andrew. Thus the Church of Constantinople would claim to be founded by an apostle like the other Apostolic Churches (Jerusalem, Antioch, etc.).

Death of St Andrew

According to the second-century *Acts of Andrew*, the apostle was martyred in Patras, an important center in central Greece, then capital of the province of Achaia. Seized by order of the proconsul Aegeates for converting his wife, St Andrew was condemned to be crucified. According to the Acts, St. Andrew spoke to the bystanders from the cross, saying: "Listen to us rather who hang here for the Lord's sake and are about to depart out of this body. Renounce all the lusts of the world, spit upon the worship of abominable idols and establish your minds as men believing in Christ."

The tradition that St Andrew asked to be crucified on an X-shaped cross because he was unworthy of being placed on a cross like Christ's is of later origin, probably in imitation of St. Peter.

St Andrew's Relics

The apostle's tomb soon attracted many pilgrims and quarrels arose over his relics. When the Roman Emperor Constantine, a Christian, established his new capital, Constantinople, on the site of Byzantium, he ordered that relics of the Saint be moved from Patras to Constantinople. . In 357 they were taken to Constantinople by order of Emperor Constantius and interred in the Church of the Holy Apostles, built by his father, St Constantine, to house the remains of all the apostles. The saint's skull was returned to Patras by Emperor Basil I (867-886).

A portion of the saint's relics were also taken by St. Regulos (or Rule), the Bishop of Patras, who was shipwrecked off the coast of Fife, in Scotland. One version of the story goes that it was at this time that St. Regulos brought some of St. Andrew's relics to Scotland, because he was warned by an angel in a dream to take the Saint's bones to "the ends of the Earth." The Scottish people adopted St. Andrew Patron Saint of Scotland and his X-shaped cross (the Saltire) as their symbol.

History does not recall what became of the relics of St Andrew that were brought to Scotland, but it is likely that they were destroyed in a frenzy of religious uproar in the 16th century by Protestant reformers, who saw the veneration of such relics as idolatry, forbidden by the teachings of the Bible.

The relics of St. Andrew that were in Constantinople were taken to Amalfi in southern Italy after the sack of Constantinople in 1208. They remain there, in the Cathedral of St. Andrew, to this day.

In 1408 Patras passed into the hands of the Venetians. From 1429 to 1460 the city was ruled by the Despots of Mystra, the Palaiologi, and when Patras was captured by the Turks Thomas Palaiologos removed St. Andrew's head to Rome where it was kept in St. Peter's Basilica until 1964 when it was returned to Patras by Pope Paul VI, the first of many such ecumenical gestures in recent years.

St. Andrew's relics, consisting of a small finger, the top of his cranium and pieces of the cross, are displayed in the cathedral at Patras. The chased gold casket containing the saint's head, was venerated in St. Peter's Rome from 1462 until 1964 when it was returned to Patras.

In 1980 fragments of the cross of St Andrew, venerated in Marseilles since the Crusades, were also returned. They are enshrined together with the relics in the Cathedral of St Andrew, the largest church in the Balkans.

St. Andrew Today

In recent years St. Andrew has become an important focus in the growing friendship between Rome and Constantinople. Since 1969 a delegation from the Roman Catholic Church has visited Constantinople each November to participate in the feast of St Andrew, patron of the Byzantine Church. Every June a Greek Orthodox delegation has traveled to Rome for its patronal feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Several times these delegations have been led by the Pope of Rome and the Ecumenical Patriarch.

You had walked in the light of the Forerunner. But when the incarnate Image of the Father's glory appeared to save mankind in His mercy, you were the first to follow after Him, O illustrious Andrew, whose spirit was illumined by the perfect splendor of His radiant divinity. Thus you were the Apostle and Herald of Christ our God: entreat Him to save and enlighten our souls.

Renouncing the catching of fish, you became a fisher of men with the rod of divine preaching and the hook of faith, O illustrious Apostle, who fished the whole assembly of the nations up from the depths of error. You are the brother of Peter, whose voice went out to instruct the whole world. O Andrew, do not cease to intercede for us, the faithful, who celebrate your sacred memory with their whole heart.

Seeing the God you loved walking in the flesh on earth, O first-called of His eye-witnesses, you cried out to your brother, full of joy: "Simon, we have found the One whom we love!" Then you spoke to the Savior in the words of David: "Like the deer that yearns for living streams, so my soul is thirsting for You, O Christ our God!" Loving Him ever more deeply, you joined Him by means of the Cross, as a true disciple imitating His passion; since you share His glory, ceaselessly pray to Him for our souls.

From the Services of This Feast

December 4 – The Great Martyr St Barbara

EVERYONE WANTS TO CLAIM St Barbara as their own. This is possible because she is not mentioned in any contemporary writings which have come down to us. She is first mentioned in a seventh-century Roman Martyrology, some 350 years after her death. The sources of what has been passed down about her were collected by St Simeon Metaphrastes ("the Translator") in his tenth-century lives of the saints, the Menologion.

Middle Eastern sources record that Barbara was from Heliopolis in present-day Lebanon. Some sources describe her as a native of Heliopolis in Egypt or of Nicomedia (in Turkey today). All the stories of this martyr say that she was the daughter of a rich pagan named Diocsoros who, after his wife's death, kept her locked in a tower to keep her from the eyes of strangers.

After a certain time Dioscoros relented and allowed his daughter a measure of freedom. She became acquainted with the Gospel through some young Christian women who befriended her and through a priest fleeing persecution in Alexandria who ultimately baptized her.

Dioscoros had commissioned the construction of a bath house on his estate. In his absence Barbara had altered the plans to include a third window, to represent the Trinity. When Dioscoros learned the reason for her actions he flew at her in a rage. She escaped, but was later captured and severely beaten.

The last great persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was in full swing. When Barbara would not renounce her faith, Dioscoros handed her over to the prefect of the city, Martian, who subjected her to public humiliation and torture. Juliana, a Christian woman in the crowd reproached Martian for his cruelty. In return he condemned Juliana to die with Barbara. Both were beheaded, Barbara (it is said) by her own father. A pious man named Galentain recovered the bodies of Barbara and Juliana, buried their remains and, when the persecutions ended, erected a shrine in their memory.

In the sixth century relics of St Barbara were brought to Constantinople. Six hundred years later a portion of them was brought to Kiev by Barbara, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor, when she married Michael, the Grand Prince of Kiev. Around the same time the Coptic church of St Cyrus in Old Cairo was rebuilt as the Church of St Barbara to house relics of this saint. She is venerated in all the Churches of East and West. Because of the lack of contemporary witnesses to her struggle, the Roman Church removed her name from their universal calendar. She is still venerated in many local Western Churches, particularly in Europe.

In the Middle East her feast is observed by the preparation of sweets, including the "Barbara." This is the traditional boiled wheat dish made for memorials of a saint or of the deceased. In this case it is sweetened with pomegranate seeds, raisins, anise and sugar. It is frequently brought to homes by children singing a traditional carol about this saint. They are often costumed to recall the disguises St Barbara used to elude her father.

Also on December 4 – St John of Damascus

WHILE ST BARBARA LIVED in the fourth century during the Roman persecutions, John of Damascus lived in the seventh century, after the Arab conquest of Syria.

John was born in Damascus in c. 680, the son of Sergius ibn al-Mansour, a civil servant to the Umayyad caliphate, as was his father before him. Sergius wanted his son to "learn not only the books of the Muslims, but those of the Greeks as well," according to one ancient source. John was tutored by a Sicilian monk who had been kidnapped by Arabs and brought to Damascus. This monk was also tutor to St Cosmas of Maiuma, John's foster brother whom his father had taken in after he was orphaned.

In 706 the caliphate increased the Islamizing of Syria. Many Christians in civil service, including John's father, left the government administration at that time. Some think that this was when John entered the monastery of Mar Saba near Jerusalem. John was certainly a professed monk before the outbreak of iconoclasm in 717, which he opposed. In all John composed three *Apologetic Treatises against those Decrying the Holy Images* which were widely circulated and were cited as authoritative at the Second Council of Nicaea, years after his death.

John also composed a number of apologetic treatises against the Monophysites, Monotheletes, Nestorians and Muslims as well as dogmatic treatises. His *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* was perhaps the first systematic presentation of Christian theology in both East and West.

John of Damascus is perhaps most revered as a poet and hymnographer. He composed a number of canons which are still sung at Orthros (Matins). Some credit the beauty of his poetry with making the canon an important part of the morning service. His Paschal canon, "Today is the day of the resurrection" is most particularly loved. He also composed the canons sung in the Byzantine Churches on the Great Feasts of the Nativity, the Theophany and Pentecost.

John is also credited with composing the principal parts of the Octoechos, the book of eight tones, which contains the weekly services used in Byzantine churches.

John ended his life in his monastery on December 4, 749. The cave he used as a hermitage is kept today as a chapel dedicated to his memory.

From St John of Damascus

"These eight passions should be destroyed as follows: gluttony by self-control; un-chastity by desire for God and longing for the blessings held in store; avarice by compassion for the poor; anger by goodwill and love for all men; worldly dejection by spiritual joy; listlessness by patience, perseverance and offering thanks to God; self-esteem by doing good in secret and by praying constantly with a contrite heart; and pride by not judging or despising anyone in the manner of the boastful Pharisee (cf. Lk 18:11-12), and by considering oneself the least of all men. When the intellect has been freed in this way from the passions we have described and been raised up to God, it will henceforth live the life of blessedness, receiving the pledge of the Holy

Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 1:22). And when it departs this life, dispassionate and full of true knowledge, it will stand before the light of the Holy Trinity and with the divine angels will shine in glory through all eternity." *On the Virtues and the Vices*

Being One in Christ (Gal 3:23-4:5)

"ALL OF YOU who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, alleluia." This verse, sung at baptisms in Byzantine churches, is taken from the passage read at today's Divine Liturgy (Gal 3:23-4:5). The newly baptized is processed around the baptistery and into the nave wearing the white baptismal garment, the "robe of light." This rite illustrates St Paul's point in the passage that the Christian is one who has "put on" Christ. But what does "putting on Christ" mean apart from this ceremony?

Neither Jew Nor Greek

We see St Paul's explanation in the next verse, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 3:28). Once a person puts on Christ all human distinctions which divide people from one another – race, social status, gender and any other division people have made to exalt themselves over others – cease to have any meaning. A Christian is a brother or sister to every other person baptized in Christ, of any race or nation.

Here St Paul was echoing one of Christ's most controversial teachings. The family was the most important social structure of His day. It remains so in traditional societies everywhere. But Christ taught that being related by blood was not as important as being "related" in God's family. "*While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brethren stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then someone said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brethren are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.' But He answered and said to the one who told Him, 'Who is My mother and who are My brethren?' And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, 'Here are My mother and My brethren! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother*'" (Mt 12:46-50). Reflecting on this passage, St Augustine was emboldened to say, "It is greater for Mary to have been a disciple of Christ than the mother of Christ" (Sermon 72). Her physical role of bearing Christ in her womb was, after all, dependent on her spiritual acceptance of God's will at the annunciation.

From the earliest days of the Church the great sign of this union of all believers with one another has been the Eucharist. As St Paul reminded the Corinthians, "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread*" (1 Cor 10:16, 17). To this day Byzantine Catholics and Orthodox as well as some other Eastern Christians, always receive a particle of "*that one bread*," a single loaf broken and divided among participants, as a reminder that at the Eucharist we all share in the one Christ.

Putting on the Mind of Christ

A few years ago, it became popular to label coffee mugs, T-shirts and bracelets with the acronym WWJD ("What would Jesus do?"). Christians, this practice suggests, should think and act like Christ as well as pray to Him. St Paul took a similar approach in his epistles. We should imitate Christ's way of life, particularly in the way we relate to one another.

One area in which St Paul frequently urges believers to imitate Christ is in bearing with one another's weaknesses. *"We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me'"* (Rom 15:1-3). Christ bore our failings even to the cross; we can surely bear with the weaknesses of those we encounter in the fellowship of the Church.

Towards the end of his epistle to the Galatians St Paul suggests that not bearing with the weak is really a matter of pride. "*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself*" (Gal 6:2, 3). We are often intolerant of the weak, the ignorant or the poor because we feel ourselves somehow diminished by their company. On the contrary, bearing with the weak is a sign of true inner greatness. As St John Chrysostom observes, "What Paul says is this: If you are strong, then let the weak test your strength (Homilies on Romans, 27).

St Paul speaks with great clarity on this subject in his Epistle to the Philippians: humility is a fundamental imitation of Christ: "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond-servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross*" (Phil 2:5-8). We are urged to enter into the lives of others as Christ entered into our humanity, as an obedient servant.

St Paul is echoing here the words of Christ after He had washed the feet of His disciples: "*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you*" (Jn 13:14, 15). To put on the mind of Christ, then, means becoming a humble servant of one another in His Body, the Church.

Putting on the Trinity

Gal 4:5-7 expands even further our understanding of the mystery of "putting on Christ." The aim of the Incarnation, he teaches, is our incorporation into the "family" of God, the interrelationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit which we call the Trinity. We become children of God not by nature (as is His only-begotten Son), but by the freely given act of adoption. "*But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" (Gal 4:5-7)

St Paul also teaches here that, because we are adopted children of God in Christ, we subsequently receive the Holy Spirit in our hearts. At our baptism, of course, this is effected in the mystery of chrismation. St. Paul would return to that theme when writing to the Corinthians. Using temple imagery, he describes the baptized as holy since the Holy Spirit dwells in them: "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are*" (1 Cor 3:16, 17). This is expressed in our Liturgy when the priest invites the worshippers to Communion with the words, "Holy gifts for the holy!"

Since we have put on Christ and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, St Paul says, we can call God by name as Jesus did (see Mk 14:36). When Moses asked to know God's name he was told "I am the Existing One," the One who truly is and who is the source of all existence. Now in Christ we are given another name, *Abba*, a name of intimate relationship of son to father.

In recent years, it has been said that *Abba* was a child's word, like daddy or poppa, but there is no evidence that it was used by Jesus' contemporaries in this way. *Abba* was simply the ordinary word for father in everyday speech. It would later be the term used in monasteries for the head of the community.

December 6 – St Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia

"A Priest in Body and Soul"

A WORLD-WIDE SYMBOL OF GIFT-GIVING and love, St. Nicholas (270-343) is more revered by the Church as a Wonderworker, both in life and in death.

The earliest written source on the life of St. Nicholas we have comes from the early to mid-ninth century, almost 500 years after his death. There was at least one earlier source which no longer exists. An otherwise unknown author, Archimandrite Michael, writing to someone named Leo, mentions an earlier work that has not come down to us, "Until now the spiritual program of this illustrious pastor was unknown to many people, as you yourself suppose, although some had knowledge of his grace from the lone Acts dedicated to him."

The absence of earlier sources should not surprise us. Detailed biographies were not common in Asia Minor before the ninth century. We do find St. Nicholas mentioned in earlier writings as well as in prayers and iconography. Churches were dedicated to him, even in Constantinople so we know that he was widely known and revered in the Greek Church. One telling point is that, while the name Nicholas was not common in the area before the fourth century, its use spread quickly after St. Nicholas' lifetime.

Towards the middle of the ninth century, St. Methodios, Patriarch of Constantinople, wrote a Life of the saint, perhaps drawing on older sources. Then we have the early tenth-century Greek text of St. Symeon the Translator, who used all the available sources known to him to compile his Life. Finally we have the first Latin Life of St. Nicholas by John the Deacon, adapted from the text of St. Methodios.

The Life of St Nicholas

Nicholas was born to wealthy Christian parents in Patara, on the southwest coast of the Roman province of Lycia in Asia Minor. He was orphaned in an epidemic while he was still young and raised by his uncle, another Nicholas, the bishop of Patara.

Of a religious disposition, Nicholas was tonsured as a reader by his uncle while quite young and eventually was ordained a priest. Obeying Christ's words to "*sell what you own and give the money to the poor*," Nicholas used his own inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering.

As a prominent Christian, Nicholas was imprisoned during the persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius, which ended in 311. In response to his deliverance, Nicholas traveled to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. While there he reportedly lived with a group of monks in what is today Beit Jala. However Nicholas was not called to the monastic life and retuned to Patara.

On the return voyage the ship was threatened by a powerful storm. The terrified sailors were amazed to see the storm suddenly subside at Nicholas' prayers. This gave rise to the custom of praying to St Nicholas as protector of seamen.

In 317 Nicholas was chosen as archbishop of Myra the provincial capital of Lycia. He was neither a great ascetic nor a martyr. His reputation rests on his pastoral concern for the people under his care, particularly the poor and the defenseless.

The tenth-century life of St. Nicholas by Symeon the Translator tells of secret gift-giving to save an impoverished man's daughters from penury. St. Nicholas secretly left money to provide a dowry for each of the daughters in turn. These stories and more became known in the West and Nicholas became a favorite saint throughout Europe.

Nicholas and Arius

In 325 Nicholas reportedly attended the First Ecumenical Council called by the emperor to combat the Arian schism prevailing in parts of the empire. Arius, a priest in Alexandria, taught that the Son was not equal to the Father but created by Him. The Holy Spirit, thought to be created by the Son, was subordinate to both. Arius' teaching was spread throughout the Empire as an "earlier" form of Christianity than that of the official Churches. The Council, called by the emperor to restore peace and unity to the Churches, produced the first part of the Creed we use today. St Athanasius the Great, who was present at the council, wrote that 318 bishops participated. Only two finally refused to accept the Creed and it eventually became the standard of faith in all the Churches of its day.

Only a few fragments of the official acts of the council have survived. The lists of participants which have come down to us vary in the number of bishops named. Nicholas is named in a few of them and the story of his participation has become enshrined in the Church's liturgy and iconography.

Always a firm opponent of Arianism, Nicholas reputedly opposed Arius personally at the council. As John the Deacon described it, "Animated like the Prophet Elias with zeal for God, he put the heretic Arius to shame at the synod not only by word but also by deed, smiting him on the cheek." Nicholas, the account continues, was deposed as a result. His omophorion and Gospel Book, signs of his office, were confiscated and he was imprisoned.

During the night the Lord Jesus and the Theotokos appeared to Nicholas in prison, restoring the items taken from him. When the emperor was notified of what had happened, he pardoned Nicholas and reinstated him. Since the eye-witnesses at the council, St Athanasius and Eusebius of Caesarea do not mention any such incident in their writings, modern authors tend to discount it. Nevertheless, icons of St. Nicholas often depict his vision of Christ and the Theotokos returning his omophorion and Gospel.

St Nicholas became an increasingly influential public figure later in his episcopate. He successfully intervened to save three convicted looters who had been condemned to death, falsely accused of murder. When a famine struck the region in 333 Nicholas intercepted a ship laden with wheat bound for Constantinople. He persuaded the seamen to leave a substantial portion for the people of Myra. When the ship arrived at the imperial capital it was found that it still had its entire original cargo. Nothing was missing.

Another often-repeated story tells how the emperor had levied a heavy tax on the people of Myra. St Nicholas went to Constantinople and pleaded successfully with the emperor to have the taxes reduced. Nicholas dispatched the decree to Myra immediately by sea so that, when the emperor had second thoughts about the tax cut, St Nicholas could tell him that it had already been enforced.

The "Manna" of St. Nicholas

Nicholas died in Myra on December 6, 343 and was buried in his cathedral. His tomb became a famous pilgrimage site, blessed with many miracles. The tomb exuded a sweet-smelling liquid called the Manna of St. Nicholas. As a result his relics were not disturbed and parceled out to other churches. After the Seljuk Turks conquered the area, Italian merchants in Venice and Bari sought to "rescue" the saint from the Turks. In 1087 seamen broke into the tomb and spirited away the saint's body to Bari. It was enshrined by the pope in a great basilica built there in Nicholas' honor. The Manna continued to exude from the tomb in Bari as it had in Myra. Every year to this day a vial of this fluid is extracted from the tomb, mixed with blessed water and given to the faithful.

December 9 –Feast of the Maternity of St. Anne

THE CHURCHES OF EAST AND WEST generally commemorate the saints on the day of their death, their "heavenly birthday," as some describe it. In addition the Church remembers three conceptions: those of Christ (the Annunciation, March 25), of His Mother (December 9), and of St John the Forerunner (September 23). We celebrate these days as festivals recognizing that

each was sanctified even before their birth in lieu of the tremendous role they played in salvation history: Christ by virtue of His divine nature and Mary and John by the grace of God given them.

In the Byzantine calendar, as in that of the West, Christ's conception is celebrated exactly nine months before the festival of His birth. With the Theotokos and the Forerunner the nine months are not exact. Mary's conception is remembered on December 9 and her nativity on September 8. St John's conception is remembered on September 23 and his birth of June 24. This is a way of saying that the three conceptions were not identical: Christ's was unique.

The Story of Mary's Conception

The conceptions of Christ and the Forerunner are recorded in chapter 1 of the Gospel of Luke. The story of Mary's conception is not found in the canonical Scriptures but in the mid-second century *Protoevangelium* (or Pre-Gospel) of St James. This text tells that, for many years, Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, were childless and the couple suffered much reproach as a result. When they were in Jerusalem to offer sacrifice to God, the High Priest, Issachar, upbraided Joachim: "You are not worthy to offer sacrifice with those childless hands." Both spouses gave themselves to fervent prayer, and the Archangel Gabriel announced to each of them separately that they would be the parents of a daughter who would bring blessings to the whole human race.

The icon of the feast shows Saints Joachim and Anne embracing after each had run to share the news of their daughter-to-be. The icon also very prominently displays a bed to indicate that this conception took place by the usual physical means, unlike the conception of Christ.

The first record of this feast being celebrated is from fifth-century Palestine. It spread to southern Italy during the eighth century and from there to England, France, Germany, and eventually Rome. In the East this feast has always been called "the Conception (or Maternity) of St. Anne," stressing Anne's conceiving of the Theotokos, just as the conception of Christ is revered as "the Annunciation to the Theotokos." In the West the feast came to be called "the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary" and later "the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

The Unique Holiness of Mary

All the Churches of East and West have always believed that the Virgin Mary was, from her conception, filled with every grace of the Holy Spirit in view of her calling as the Mother of Christ our God. This belief is even professed in Islam. Muslim lore records a *hadith* or tradition, which states that the only children born without the "touch of Satan," were Mary and Jesus for God imposed "a veil" between them and Satan.

In the Middle Ages increasing devotion to the Mother of God in the West saw the rise of opinions on the holiness of Mary. Some came to believe that she was even conceived without human intercourse, as Christ was. Finally, in the 17th century, Pope Benedict XIV formally condemned this opinion.

While it was generally believed that the Theotokos was filled with divine grace from her conception, there was no general understanding on how this happened. The Eastern Church calls Mary *achrantos* (spotless or immaculate), but has never defined exactly what this meant.

Following St. Augustine's thought on original sin, the Western Church gradually came to accept the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin."

The Orthodox Churches rejected the dogmatic nature of this teaching pronounced by the pope as an act of piety on his own authority. Many also objected to it because it defines Mary's holiness in terms of a certain understanding of original sin. What does "all stain of original sin" mean? Was the Mother of God exempted from the consequences of the ancestral sin (death, corruption, the effects of sin)? Some Western Catholics still believe that Mary did not (in fact, could not) die, but this has never been taught by their Church.

The "stain of original sin" was described by the sixteenth-century Council of Trent as "the privation of righteousness that each child contracts at its conception." There is no such understanding in Eastern theology and so to say that Mary was free of it has little meaning in the East. Perhaps this is why many Eastern Catholics, when they hear of "the Immaculate Conception" assume that it refers to the conception of Christ.

East and West agree that, the Theotokos was fully human like the rest of us: what Fr Thomas Hopko calls "mere human," unlike her Son who is a "real human" but not a mere human because He is the Word of God incarnate. In his book *The Winter Pascha* he writes, "We are all born mortal and tending toward sin. But we are not born guilty of any *personal* sin, certainly not one allegedly committed 'in Adam.' Nor are we born stained because of the manner in which we are conceived by the sexual union of our parents."

The Byzantine Churches celebrate the fact of Mary's conception on December 9, but commemorate her holiness on another feast: that of her Entrance into the Temple (November 21) In the kondakion for that feast we sing "The most pure Temple of our holy Savior, and the most precious and bright bridal chamber, the Virgin, sacred treasury of the glory of God, openly appears today in the Temple of the Lord, *bringing with her the grace of the Most Holy Spirit*. Wherefore, the angels of God are singing: This is the heavenly Tabernacle!" She did not become holy in the temple – she brought the grace of God with her. When and how did she acquire it? Human reasoning does not help us there. Nevertheless, we ceaselessly proclaim her as our "all-holy, immaculate, most highly blessed and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever virgin Mary.

Veneration of the Theotokos in the Church

CHURCHES AND INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS of many traditions are displaying Nativity scenes this season. All of them will include an image of the Virgin Mary, although there are serious differences in how these Christians view her. The historic Churches, Eastern and Western, reverence her as blessed and ever-virgin and ask her to intercede with God for us. Most Protestants do not, in the view that there is no warrant in the Bible for such activity.

Reverence for the Virgin Mary arose in the early Church in view of its growing belief that her Son, the Lord Jesus, is truly God and Man. The story of the annunciation – which is in the New

Testament (Lk 1:26-38) – depicts Him as "*Son of the Most High*" and "*Son of God*," conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of a woman who has "*not known a man*." His conception in Mary's womb was a sign of His true divinity, and reverence for His mother was a way of proclaiming Him as God.

By the second century thinkers like St Justin the Philosopher were describing Mary as the "new Eve," in much the same way that St Paul spoke of Christ as the new Adam: "Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary conceived faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her" (*Dialogue with Trypho,* 100). As Eve took part in Adam's sin, Mary was seen as somehow taking part in Christ's reversal of Adam's fall.

Stories of Mary's Birth

As the Eastern Churches continue to do today, early Christians revered oral and other written traditions as well as the Scriptures as ways in which the Holy Spirit reveals the things of God to us. The second-century *Protoevangelium of James* is one of the most revered of these non-Biblical texts. It speaks of Mary's own conception in the womb of St Ann, her birth and her presentation in the temple at Jerusalem. This work also teaches Mary's virginity before giving birth, the miraculous way in which she gave birth, and her physical virginity even after giving birth.

The *Protoevangelium* would influence, not only subsequent theology, but also the prayer-life of all believers. Our feasts of the Maternity of St Ann (Dec. 9), the Nativity of the Theotokos (Sept. 8) and her Entrance into the Temple (Nov. 21) are all based on this work.

"Theotokos" and "Aeiparthenos"

During the second- and third-century controversies about the divinity of Christ two terms describing the Virgin Mary came into use to support the position that Christ was fully both God and man by nature. The term *Theotokos* (she who bore God) had been in use in the Church of Alexandria at least from the time of the Arian controversy. They had concluded that, since Jesus Christ is "true God from true God" as the Council of Nicaea (325) declared, His Mother can rightly be said to have borne God in her womb. Churches in the tradition of Antioch, however, expressed doubts about adopting this title. The ensuing Council of Ephesus (431) affirmed the use of *Theotokos* and deposed the patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorios, who had banned its use. By identifying Mary as the Mother of God the Word, the council underscored the teaching that Christ was indivisibly God and Man. Devotion to the Virgin Mary and the use of prayer for her intercession spread after this council throughout the Churches.

All the historic Churches, except for the Assyrian Church of the East, refer to Mary as Theotokos while the Assyrian Church uses the title "Mother of Christ our God." In the 1994 Agreed Statement between their two Churches the Pope of Rome, John Paul II, and the Catholikos of the Church of the East, Mar Dinkha IV, affirmed: "We both recognize the legitimacy and rightness of

these expressions of the same faith and we both respect the preference of each Church in her liturgical life and piety."

The term *Aeiparthenos* (ever-virgin), widely used in our liturgy, was also popularized at this time, although it did not carry the same weight as Theotokos. The idea that Mary was not only a virgin when she conceived and gave birth but ever after was taught as early as the second century, notably in the *Protoevangelium* and by St. Irenaeus of Lyons, becoming increasingly popular in the fourth century. St Epiphanios of Salamis in Cyprus attests to its widespread acceptance in the Church at that time, even while minimizing its importance: "Now how could Joseph dare to have relations with the Virgin Mary whose holiness was so great? But even if she had sexual relations – and perish that thought! – what good would it do us to inquire into this? Which is the better choice, to leave the matter to God, or to insist on what is bad? Plainly, Scripture has not told us that we may not have eternal life, but will go to Judgment unless we believe that Mary had relations again" (Sect 780).

St John Chrysostom (347-407) defended the perpetual virginity of Mary on a number of grounds, one of which was the Gospel affirmation that, after the crucifixion, "*from that hour that disciple took her to his own home*" (Jn 19:27). This was seen to imply that, after the deaths of Joseph and now Jesus, there was no one else to look after Mary and she had to be entrusted to St John.

Whose Children Were They?

The New Testament includes several mentions of Jesus' brothers and sisters, such as this one: ""*Where did this* m*an get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary and His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did He get all these things*?" (Mt 13:54-6) The Gospels depict Jesus' relatives as resisting His ministry during His earthly life. St Paul reports that the risen Christ appeared to James (see 1 Cor 15:7); subsequently he and other family members became active disciples, with James leading the Church in Jerusalem. The New Testament includes epistles of James and Jude, showing the esteem in which the apostolic Church held them.

The *Protoevangelium of James* affirmed that Jesus' "brothers and sisters" were Joseph's children from a previous marriage. Eastern writers such as Origen took up this view and it is the most commonly held opinion among Eastern Christians. Thus, James is often depicted in icons of the flight into Egypt as a boy walking alongside Joseph.

St Jerome, the fourth-century Illyrian monk and Biblical interpreter, held that "brothers and sisters" was a way of saying "relatives" and that James and the others would have been Jesus' cousins. This is the generally accepted position among Western Catholics.

Many Protestants today teach that Mary was a virgin only until the birth of Christ because nothing beyond that is mentioned in the Scriptures. They might be surprised to learn that Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and other leaders of the Reformation all agreed that the Virgin Mary did not have other children. They did not deny the traditional teachings, but rejected those excessive devotions that exalted Mary at the expense of Christ.

Some Anglicans and Lutherans have revived veneration of the Holy Virgin, careful that that "any interpretation of the role of Mary must not obscure the unique mediation of Christ" and that "any consideration of Mary must be linked with the doctrines of Christ and the Church" (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Consultation).

Hymns from December 9

Behold! The promises of the prophets are realized, for the Holy Mountain is planted in the womb, the Divine Ladder is set up, the great Throne of the King is ready, the place for the passage of the Lord is prepared. The dry bush that fire cannot consume is blossoming and the treasure-house of sanctifying grace is like an abundant flow of blessings that heal the barrenness of Anne, whom we glorify with faith.

In the womb of Anne, a new heaven is created at the hand of God the Creator. From it will shine forth the Sun which knows no setting, illuminating the whole world with His divine rays in His love for mankind and His abundant mercy.

Adam, behold your renewal! Eve, exult with joy! A barren, waterless wasteland has produced the most beautiful fruit. She will bring forth the Bread of Immortality for the world, bringing all barrenness to an end. Today, let us also exult in joy together with them.

Consumerism and the Nativity Fast

WITH THE FIRST SCENT of cooler weather in the air, merchants begin marketing potential Christmas gifts. As the holiday nears, the shopping frenzy intensifies with music, parties and decorations all telling us "Hurry up and buy something." Our Church, on the other hand, tells us that it's time for renewed fasting and almsgiving.

Gift-giving as we know it became popular in the 1860s and grew as mechanical and, later, electrical goods came on the market and Santa began appearing in ads and in stores. For most Americans, handmade goods such as pastries, canned preserves or hand-carved toys were the most common gifts until World War II. With the return to prosperity after the war, people set their sights on more expensive gifts. Today the average American is expected to spend between $700 and $800 on Christmas gifts this year.

Anti-Consumerist Protests

Even as the marketing and the spending grew voices were heard denouncing the Christmas shopping experience as an exercise in wasteful consumerism. Environmentalists deplored the focus on acquiring more and more useless "toys." Christians lamented the practice as fostering materialism rather than celebrating Christ's birth.

While many people complain about the financial and emotional stresses of Christmas shopping, some people do something about it. Some parents have decided to give only one store-bought toy per child and to focus on shared activities instead. Well-planned Christmas outings with the

family provide memories that will last a lifetime, long after plastic toys are forgotten. Others have revived the tradition of homemade gifts. They report that making a gift for and with your child provides an unforgettable and rewarding experience for both parent and offspring. Internet sites are filled with more suggestions for frugal and creative gift ideas than ever.

Our Secret Weapon: the Nativity Fast

Eastern Christians seeking to escape the commerce-driven "spirit of Christmas" have a formidable ally in the Nativity Fast. While the length of the fast varies in the different Churches, the spirit behind it is the same. We best prepare for a Christian festival by intensifying our practice of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We seek to deepen within ourselves the spirit of repentance which these practices foster. We are, as it were, heeding the message of St John the Baptist – "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" – as we anticipate the coming feast as a manifestation of that kingdom.

At first our prayer life during the Nativity Fast does not revolve around the Nativity itself. While some churches serve akathists or a pre-Nativity paraclisis service, the focus of prayer in Byzantine Churches during much of this Fast is simply to deepen our relationship with the living Lord, the basic prayer life of Christians at any time. Our fasting seasons are fundamentally "excuses" giving us a reason to observe a fuller Christian life than we might live otherwise.

In the same way, our fasting and almsgiving are not focused on Christmas as much as they are the basic practices of believers at any time. We intensify them at this time because a heart focused on the ways of Christ in the best preparation for celebrating His coming into the world.

The Fast Intensifies

As the feast draws nearer our liturgical prayer revolves around the time before the coming of Christ. Several Old Testament prophets are remembered individually, enabling us to focus on their role in preparing for the coming of the Messiah. On the two Sundays before the Nativity a general commemoration of the Israelites who came before Christ and a memorial of the actual ancestors of Christ are observed. During the fore-feast of the Nativity, the five days before the actual celebration, our liturgical hymns direct our attention to the mystery of the incarnation.

Unfortunately, the Nativity Fast competes for our attention with the secular season of shopping, Christmas parties and gift exchanges. People seeking to observe the season as Eastern Christians might do well to view the question in light of the adage, "Enjoy the roses, but beware the thorns." Employ the positive aspects of this season in our culture while avoiding the ones which endanger our Eastern Christian spiritual life.

"***Enjoy the Roses***" might include singing Christmas carols or watching faith-based films instead of our usual entertainment. Religious Christmas cards and decorations are still acceptable in our society and provide us with a chance to enter into the season in the spirit of the Nativity Fast. Perhaps most importantly, our secular society provides us with many opportunities for sharing with the needy during this season. Participating in such programs enables us to practice almsgiving in solidarity with our neighbors of other faiths.

"Beware the Thorns" takes us to the matter of Christmas parties. In some places, these gatherings more resemble New Year's Eve or a tailgate party than a Christmas celebration. Eastern Christians would do well to completely avoid participating in this kind of activity. If pressured to take part, especially in the workplace, an Eastern Christian may take the opportunity to explain that this is a fasting season for us and that it would be inappropriate for you to participate. Let them feel guilty for asking!

You may decide to attend a Christmas party which avoids excesses, particularly in the workplace, while still maintaining the fast. We can usually enjoy the conviviality while avoiding those foods from which we are fasting.

In any case Eastern Christian church groups should be expected to delay their own Christmas parties to the week after Christmas, when the fast is over and the Church is still celebrating Christ's Nativity.

Most parishes have a children's Christmas celebration which includes gift-giving. As a rule, it is St Nicholas rather than Santa who presides at these events in Eastern churches. Still, there are few if any Eastern Christian parishes in the West whose children need to receive gifts from the church. The best gift a parish could give its children might be teaching them to give instead of to receive. Children might be asked to give a gift to St Nicholas instead of expecting to receive one. The toys and games our children no longer enjoy can be re-gifted to the disadvantaged in hospitals, shelters or parishes in poorer neighborhoods. In this way, we teach our children to be "Santa's Helpers" rather than the victims of materialism disguised as the Christmas spirit.

Sunday of the Forefathers (Second Sunday before the Nativity)
Colossians 3:4-11 – Luke 14:16-24

THE LITURGICAL PREPARATION for the feast of Christ's Nativity begins today with the ***Sunday of the Forefathers***, which commemorates all those whose lives set the stage for the coming of the Messiah. Next week we observe the ***Sunday of the Ancestors*** of Christ, when we hear St Matthew's genealogy of those who were Christ's physical ancestors. From December 20 to 24 we observe a five-day "holy week" during which Christ's birth seems ever closer. As we sing during those days, "Today the Virgin is on her way to the cave where she will give birth." This fore-feast of the Nativity culminates on December 24, the ***Paramony*** of the feast.

Usually translated as vigil or eve, *paramony* actually refers to the *uninterrupted* nature of the Church's prayer on this day. During the day the lengthier Great Hours or Royal Hours are chanted, followed by the Typika and a more elaborate than usual Great Vespers, to which is attached the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. A special service of Great Compline with a Litia for the feast ends the day. Sometimes this leads directly into the Orthros and Divine Liturgy of December 25. In some countries of Eastern Europe it culminates with a Holy Supper prior to the Liturgy. The same cycle of uninterrupted prayer is also prescribed for the Feast of the Theophany on January 5.

Prophecies of the Messiah

THE SUNDAY OF THE FOREFATHERS intensifies the countdown to the feast of Christ's Nativity. During the Nativity Fast we celebrate the memorials of several Old Testament prophets – Obadiah (Nov. 19), Nahum (Dec. 1), Habbakuk (Dec. 2), Zepheniah (Dec. 3), Haggai (Dec. 16), and Daniel (Dec. 17). Today we reflect on how the entire Old Testament period has been a preparation for Christ and how we are called to be ready for His ultimate triumph.

It is appropriate today to reflect on what the Scriptures tells us preceded the Incarnation. The following timeline and reading guide may be helpful in doing so. All the dates older that 1000 BC are approximate.

Before Time – The Word was with God before anything material came to be (John 1:1-4). It is through this eternal Word that our material creation comes into being.

The Pre-History of the Israelites

Before 4000 BC – The creation of our universe, the human race falls away from communion with God, life on earth as we know it begins (Genesis 1-3). Genesis actually contains two creation stories. The first (Gen 1:1-2:3) is a version of an older Babylonian myth re-edited to teach that creation is by the will of the only true God, not the result of warring gods and demons. It is cast in the form of a single week to promote the character of the Sabbath as a day of rest. Its narrative (creation begins with a burst of light followed by the creation of the planets, etc.) harmonizes with the modern Big Bang theory and subsequent discoveries.

Before 3000 BC – Sin prevails and increases, illustrated by Cain and Abel and Lamech, Noah and the Great Flood, (Gen 4-9). According to Jewish tradition, God makes a new covenant with Noah after the flood Man is committed to observe the seven Noahide Laws prohibiting idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy, and the eating of meat with its blood (i.e. while the animal is still alive). They are also enjoined to establish courts of law.

Before 2100 BC – The rise of Middle Eastern peoples, the Towel of Babel (Gen 10, 11). Jewish tradition sees the tower as an act of arrogance aimed at world domination by a particular people which God rejects.

Before 1991 BC – Abraham and his sons Isaac and Jacob (Gen 12-36). God calls the Mesopotamian Abram, renames him and promises that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars and that they will inherit the land of Canaan. He establishes circumcision as the sign of that covenant.

Israel in Egypt

1900-1806 BC - Joseph and his brothers: the descendants of Abraham in Egypt (Gen 37-50). Sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, Joseph becomes the most powerful person in Pharaoh's court

when he favorably interprets the sovereign's dream, averting a famine in Egypt. He is then able to rescue his father and brothers and insure the Israelites' survival.

1800-1446 BC – The Israelites prosper, then are enslaved (Exodus 1, 2).

1450-1400 BC – The call of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, beginnings of Judaism: the Ten Commandments, the establishment of the priesthood and erection of the tabernacle (Ex 2-40, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). This is the formative experience of Israel, celebrated each year at the Passover: their liberation from slavery in Egypt and passage through the Red Sea to freedom in the Land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants.

The Promised Land

1400-1375 BC – Joshua leads the Israelites to conquer parts of the "Promised Land" (Joshua).

1375-1050 BC – Israelite tribes settle in the Promised Land. Governed by tribal elders or Judges, they extend their control of the area at the expense of the Philistines (Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel 1-7).

The United Kingdom

1050-931 BC – The Israelites form a united kingdom under Saul, David and Solomon. This is the Golden Age of the Israelite nation. Saul was chosen by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the first king. In 1007, during a losing battle with the Philistines, he fell on his sword to avoid capture.

God chooses the righteous although flawed David to succeed Saul through the prophet Samuel. God makes a covenant with him that his throne would be established forever. David would be the ancestor of the Messiah, promised to come from the house of David. The third king, Solomon, was renowned for his wisdom and power. He is considered author of the earliest Biblical Wisdom Literature. Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem but ultimately turned to the idolatry of his foreign wives (1 Sam 8-31; 1 Kings 1-11, 1 Chronicles).

Breakup of the United Kingdom

931-.860 BC – The kingdom is divided in two: north and south, Israel and Judah. Unity and monotheism give way to squabbling and pagan influences (1 Kings 12- 17, 2 Chronicles.

860-722 BC – Prophets Elijah, Elisha, Joel, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah insist on a return to monotheism, justice among the people (1 Kings 17-22; 2 Kings 1-17; Joel, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah.

722 BC – Kingdom of Israel defeated. The victorious Assyrians settle foreigners in the land. The intermingling of Israelites and pagans gives rise to the Samaritans (2 Kings 17-24).

700-590 BC – Prophets Naoum, Zepheniah, Jeremiah, Habbakuk and Ezekiel warn the Kingdom of Judah that they too have forsaken God and face destruction.

The Babylonian Captivity

588-586 BC – The Babylonians attack Jerusalem, conquer it and deport the elite to Babylon. Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesy a return.

537 BC –The Persians defeat the Babylonians and allow the Jews to return to their country and rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1-6). Many Jews remain in Babylon and prosper there (Esther).

535-430 BC – Judea is restored, the temple scrolls become the basis of the Old Testament and Jewish life is revived (Ezra, Nehemiah) under nominal Persian rule.

Greek and Roman Rule

333 BC – Alexander the Great defeats the Persians and extends Greek rule throughout the Middle East. Jews become an important colony in Alexandria, Egypt.

250 BC – Jews in Alexandria translate the Old Testament into Greek. Others books written in Aramaic, Greek or Hebrew are included (Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and parts of Daniel) in what is called the Septuagint (LXX). The books of Maccabees, written later in Hebrew, were translated into Greek and added to the Septuagint.

175-164 BC –The Jews in the Holy Land are suppressed by the Greek ruler of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, who defiles the temple and tries to abolish the Jewish religion. The Jews, led by the Maccabees, revolt and recover Jewish independence. (1 to 4 Maccabees), which lasts until 63 BC.

63 BC – The Romans seize control of Syria. The Jewish kingdom becomes the Roman province of Palestine.

Prophecies Written in the Old Testament

Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, begins with the stories of the creation and the fall of Adam and Eve. Genesis concludes their tragic story with these words addressed to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head while you strike at his heel” (Gen 3:15). Many Fathers saw this as the first heralding of the Messiah’s victory over sin and death (the “proto-gospel”). Satan’s seeming defeat of Christ on the cross is but a striking of His heel while Christ’s striking at his head is His ultimate defeat of Satan. It would take countless generations – from the beginning of humanity, through the years of both Old and New Testaments and the subsequent history of this age – for this event to be fulfilled.

The Prophets Read in the Church

At the time of the Hebrew kingdoms (the six or seven hundred years before Christ) prophets were periodically calling the people to trust in God despite the troubles of their nation. Despite conflicts with the Philistines or the Assyrians, and even in the midst of defeat and exile by the Babylonians and occupation by the Romans, the prophets encouraged the people to trust in God who would provide a deliverer.

After the death and resurrection of Christ the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit came to see these prophecies fulfilled in a decisive way by Jesus Christ, who delivers all mankind – not just the Jewish people – from its ultimate enemies, sin and death, not just foreign oppressors. Around the Old Testament prophecies of a deliverer the apostles built their preaching of the true Messiah (Anointed One) of God, Christ Jesus the Savior.

What we call the Old Testament was the Bible for the early Church as well as for Judaism and its prophecies shaped the presentation of the incarnation in the New Testament. As the following quotations show, the apostles considered these prophecies as clearly pointing to the coming of Christ:

- *His Conception* (Isaiah 7:14, cited in Mt 1:23) - "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son."
- *The Place of His Birth* (Micah 5:2, cited in Mt 2:6) - "Bethlehem…out of you shall come a ruler…"
- *The Flight into Egypt* (Hosea 11:1, cited in Mt 2:15) - "Out of Egypt I called my son."
- *The Slaughter of the Infants* (Jeremiah 31:15, cited in Mt 2:18) - "A voice was heard in Ramah…"
- *His home in Nazareth* (possibly Judges 13:5, cited in Mt 2:23) - "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Other prophecies were frequently cited as pointing to Jesus as the Messiah:

- Numbers 24:17 - "a star shall come forth out of Jacob…"
- Isaiah 11:1 - "There shall come forth a shoot from the root of Jesse…"
- Isaiah 60:5-6 "…they shall bring gold and frankincense"

While there are no verbatim quotations of prophecies in Luke's infancy narratives, there are allusions to Old Testament scriptures throughout. In Luke 1:17, for example, John the Baptist is described by the angel as going "*before him in the spirit and power of Elijah*." This alludes to Malachi 4:5-6: "*Behold I am sending to you Elijah the Thesbite before the great and notable day of the Lord comes*." These allusions, and others throughout the Gospels, reflect the early Church's belief that the entire Old Testament leads us to see Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Let us offer up a hymn to the fathers who shone forth before the Law and under the Law, and who, by their upright will, were pleasing to the Lord and Master Who shone forth from the Virgin, for they now delight in the unfading light.

Let us honor the first Adam who was honored by the hand of the Creator, and who is the forefather of us all and who rests with all the elect in the mansions of heaven.

The Lord and God of all accepted the gifts of Abel, who offered them with a most noble soul; and when he was slain by his brother's murderous hand, He received his soul into light as that of a divine martyr.

Let us hearken to the divine sayings which declare the appearance of Christ; for, lo! He is born in a cave, of a Maiden who knew not man; for the star which appeared to the astrologers proclaims His awesome nativity.

Canon of the Forefathers, Ode 1

Put On the New Man (Col 3:4-11)

CHAPTER THREE OF ST PAUL'S EPISTLE to the Colossians begins with this enigmatic statement: "*For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God*" (Col 3:3). The questions it raises are obvious: when did we die and how is our life hidden with Christ?

Many Christians, particularly in the Eastern Churches can answer the first question. We died with Christ in baptism. The passage from the Epistle to the Romans read at every baptism in Byzantine churches includes the following teaching, "*Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?*

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3, 4).

Baptism as Death and Resurrection

According to St Paul, we "become new" by means of a two-fold dynamic. We put on Christ *organically* in baptism and *consciously* by putting off the old man in the way we live. Baptism is our personal union with the death and resurrection of Christ through which the ultimate power of Death was destroyed. The catechumen puts off his or her old clothes to "buried" (immersed) in the baptismal water and "rise again" (be raised out of it. The newly-baptized then puts on the "robe of light," symbolic of the new life in Christ. "All of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia" we sing, echoing St Paul (see Gal 3:27). What cannot be depicted, of course, is the effect of our baptism: our life in Christ, hidden in God.

The life of the risen Christ is indescribable, but images help us to appreciate what it might mean. In his Catechetical Sermon on the Resurrection St John Chrysostom gives us a glimpse into some aspects of this hidden life. "All of you, enjoy this feast of faith: Receive all the riches of His loving-kindness. Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free… O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one of the dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

St John Chrysostom mentions three aspects of resurrection life we have received:

1. *Forgiveness of sins* – "Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave." When we are baptized our sins are forgiven. Future sins can be forgiven in the Church to which Christ entrusted this gift.
2. *Freedom from death* – "Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free." The heart of Death is the rupture of communion with God. Death of the body cannot break that unity for those who are living their baptism.
3. *All that is His is ours* – "Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed." Our "wealth' as heirs of the kingdom includes communion with God, expressed here and now in the Eucharist, the general gifts of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord) and the particular gifts which enable ministry. Living in the kingdom of God includes enjoying a relationship with the Theotokos, all the heavenly hosts and all the saints as well as all believers, living or dead (the communion of saints).

These blessings are hidden from the world, but "*When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory*" (v. 4).

Consequences of This Hidden Life

St Paul insists that receiving the gift of life in Christ has consequences. He first lists those sinful acts which people without any knowledge of God may commit and which believers must avoid an: "*Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth… Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.*

He goes on to include things which many people, including Christians, assume to be of little import: "*But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another…"* Then he gives the reason why such behavior is unacceptable: "*…since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.*" We must, as later writers would insist, "be what you have become": a new person in the image of Christ.

Elsewhere St Paul had explained why Christians must put away things of the earth. "*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life*" (Gal 6:7, 8). Things of the earth, like our mortal bodies, die and decay no matter how much we pamper them. Lust, envy, wrath, filthy language and the rest of St Paul's list in Colossians are simply ways we pamper our decaying flesh. By cherishing the "wealth of the kingdom" mentioned above – sowing "to the Spirit" – we enjoy in this world a measure of the life to come.

New Eyes for the New Creation

Returning to the Epistle to the Colossians, we may be surprised at what follows. St Paul confronts a problem which plagues people on every level. The "old man" puts up a wide range of divisions and barriers between peoples – you are not like us because you are not from our family, clan, village, nation, social class, race, religion, etc. None of this has any part of the new creation "**…***where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all*" (v.11). We must look at one another in new ways, not seeing what divides us but what unites us: the transforming presence of God in Christ.

In the new creation, we come to view all people as holy icons, seeing God and encountering Him in them. We affirm that God has created mankind in His image and that, despite our sins and weaknesses, there is always something of God in us. As St Clement of Alexandria taught, "When you see your brother, you see God."

In fact, in Christ we look at everything with new eyes. We realize that God is "everywhere present and filling all things," as we pray at the start of every divine service. Therefore we confess that all creation is of God and that all things are worthy of respect and reverence because they are of God. The material world is not one great consumer-good meant for our pleasure but our fellow-liturgist glorifying God with us, as we pray in the psalms, "*Give praise to Him, sun and moon; give praise to Him, all you stars and light*" (Ps 148:2).

And so, when we put off the old man with his deeds, we find that the new man in us will be renewed in knowledge after the image of the One who created us. In this we rejoice.

"God is perfect, He is faultless. And so, when Divine love becomes manifest in us in the fullness of Grace, we radiate this love --- not only on the earth, but throughout the entire universe as well. So God is in us, and He is present everywhere. It is God's all-encompassing love that manifests itself in us. When this happens, we see no difference between people: everyone is good, everyone is our brother, and we consider ourselves to be the worst of men --- servants of every created thing."

Elder Thaddeus of the Vitovnica Monastery in Serbia (+2003)

The Ultimate Coming of Christ (Lk 14:16-24)

THE SCRIPTURES DO NOT DEPICT CHRIST'S BIRTH as the ultimate point in the story of God's dealings with us. Instead we are told to look ahead to that final stage in history. In the imagery of Luke's Gospel, there shall be a great banquet – the triumph of the Messiah – and many shall be invited to share in that feast. St Paul is a bit more direct: "Christ shall appear, and when He does, you also will be revealed in glory with him" (Col 3: 4).

Banquet: Sign of the Kingdom

The Gospel passage read at the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of the Forefathers is always St Luke's version of the great banquet to which many are invited. The banquet in Jewish thought of

the biblical era was an image of the kingdom of God ushered in by the Messiah. Thus the prophet Isaiah foretold, "*On the mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees. And He will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever*" (Is 25:6-7). The banquet will be for all peoples, not just Israel, and the cover or veil separating Jew from Gentile would be destroyed. At the feast people would receive the sacrificial food in which the temple priests partook – the feast would have a liturgical character. Most importantly the feast will mark the death of Death: the renewal of life, which the Messiah would accomplish.

Isaiah's image of the Messianic Banquet was taken up by many Old Testament and other Jewish writers. The Lord Jesus Himself used the same image to describe the Kingdom, but warned the Pharisees that they would be cast out, "sons of the kingdom" though they be. "*I tell you: many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth*" (Mt 8:11-12).

This passage is particularly appropriate as we prepare for the Nativity of Christ because Christ's coming inaugurates the Messianic Kingdom. Christ calls together all peoples ("*from east and west"*) and joins us to God through Himself. He is the annihilation of death and the Source of life for all who believe in Him. Commemorating the Forefathers, we recall Christ's promise that those united to Him will sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom, a sign of our union with the saints of all ages in the Body of Christ.

Banquet: Sign of Communion

The banquet image points to a number of characteristics which speak to us of the Kingdom of God. A banquet is a sign of ***lavish hospitality***, a quality so prized in the Middle East. God displays His hospitality to us by opening His Kingdom to us with the most laving gift of all: the grace of His Christ. The banquet is also a sign of the participants' ***joy and gladness*** at being at the host's table. To use the Psalmist's words, they delight at taking the chalice of salvation and calling upon the name of the Lord.

The most important dimension to the image of a banquet is that of ***fellowship***. The banquet is a place of communion with others, of sharing together in the hospitality of the Master. As such it is a preeminent sign of the Kingdom of God, our sharing in His divine life through Christ.

The coming of Christ has nothing to do with being alone. If anything, it is the opposite. The Incarnation took place so that we would not be alone, left to ourselves, out of communion with God. Christ is born into the world so that, as was intended from the beginning, humanity could be in communion with God.

To Sin is to Be Alone

The Scriptures describe aloneness as the consequence of sin. In the Genesis story of the fall Adam hides from God after eating from the Tree – a sign that their communion was broken. In its planning and in its effect, sin is about isolating oneself from God and others. It hardens us to

see isolation from others as something good. We find the challenge of relationship with others too demanding and may react as did Cain, the mean-spirited son of Adam, "*Surely I am not my brother's keeper!*" (Gen 4:19).

Christmas and the Messianic Banquet are about communion because God is communion personified. "*God is love*" (1 Jn 4:9). God-as-love is what the Church means by calling God the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in divinity but three persons in a loving relationship. According to the book of Genesis this loving communion was extended to Adam and Eve, created after the image, according to the likeness of this God who is love. By seeking to live apart from God Adam and Eve lost this vital link, getting exactly what they desired.

To Live in God is to be in Communion

By His incarnation the Word of God – the One who was in perfect communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit – came to restore that communion with humanity. He lived in His person what Adam could not, remaining in constant communion with the Father while remaining like us in all things except for sin. His coming was not simply to show that communion with God was possible for man, but to make it possible for us to have such a relationship "*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God*" (Jn 1:12-13).

What is Christ's by nature could become ours through faith, by God's gracious will. As the Fathers tirelessly repeated, "God became man so that man might become god."

The Eucharist and Communion

The Divine Liturgy in which we regularly share has been described as a prophetic sign of the Messianic Banquet. Everything we look to experience in heaven is found in the Liturgy by anticipation. We gather with the entire Body of Christ – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the saints as well as people from every race and nation – to share in the priestly gifts of the Body and Blood of Christ. We respond to the lavish hospitality of our Host with the joy and gladness of people who "*taste the heavenly bread and the cup of life and see how good the Lord is*."

The great banquet is the final triumph of Christ which we proclaim in the Creed: "He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead…" and the revelation of those who are in Christ as well. "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come." And so our celebration of Christ – whether spread out throughout the liturgical year or experienced in each Divine Liturgy – always directs us to look ahead to "His glorious second coming."

O Christ, we worship You, our eternal King. Being Lord and Master, You rescued the three holy young men from the fire and saved Daniel from the lions. You blessed Abraham, Isaac Your servant, and Jacob his son. You willed to be like one of us by choosing to be born from them, in order that, by accepting

crucifixion and burial, You could save our forefathers who had sinned against You. Thus did You crush the powers of Death and raise those who had been long dead.

Vespers Sticheron

December 17 –The Holy Prophet Daniel and the Three Young Men in the Furnace

IN OUR FIRST TONE TROPARION of the resurrection, sung repeatedly throughout the year, we chant these words: "Glory to Your economy, O You who alone are the Lover of mankind." Our secular society uses the word *economy* for financial matters exclusively; the term has other meanings in the Church, particularly in the East.

"Divine economy" is the traditional way we refer to the way God interacts with the world, particularly in achieving the restoration of humanity to communion with Himself. Sometimes the term is paraphrased as *plan of salvation* or *dispensation*. The creation itself, and all the events connected with our redemption in Jesus Christ are included in the Church's term *economy*. They are the way God "manages" His creation.

The highpoint of God's plan for us is the Incarnation of the Word. Everything in the divine economy leading up to the coming of Christ is in some way a preparation for this event. The saga of Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites in Egypt, their exodus to the promised land and their subsequent history are all aspects of this plan which St Paul calls "*the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ*" (Eph 3:9).

One particular moment in the story of Israel figures prominently in our celebration during the Nativity Fast: the exile of the Jews to Babylon and the experience of three of them in the fiery furnace. These three young men are remembered along with the prophet Daniel on December 17 each year. They are also specifically invoked on the two Sundays before the Nativity because of the accomplishments of their faith.

The Babylonian Exile and the Book of Daniel

In 605 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and made its king a vassal. Responding to several rebellious incidents the Babylonians pillaged the city in 597 BC and destroyed the temple built by Solomon. The Jewish king, his court and many prominent Jews were taken captive and deported to Babylon. Their exile would end in 538 BC when the Persian king Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return home.

The story of the exile and captivity of the Jews forms the background of the Book of Daniel. Its present form, written in Hebrew and Greek, dates to the mid-second century BC, but contains some original Aramaic tales dating from the exile as well. It is generally considered an apocalyptic book, offering its readers consolation that their present troubles (Greek and Roman

occupation) would one day end as the Babylonian exile had ended: with the liberation of the Jews and the restoration of true worship.

Daniel was a highly placed Jew, highly regarded for his faithfulness to the Law in an era when the Law was largely neglected. The prophet Ezechiel, who lived through the Babylonian exile, puts Daniel in the highest company in this prophecy: "*The word of the LORD came again to me, saying: 'Son of man, when a land sins against Me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out My hand against it; I will cut off its supply of bread, send famine on it, and cut off man and beast from it. Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness,' says the Lord GOD*" (EZ 14:14).

The first part of the book includes three dramatic and prophetic scenes concerning Daniel and three other young Jewish nobles. When they were taken captive, they were impressed into their captor's service and given Babylonian names. "*Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego*" (Dan 1:3-7). The book uses these names indiscriminately, which sometimes confuses readers.

From the first these young Jews refused to violate the Law. They would not eat the meats given them and would only eat vegetables. Nevertheless they rose to positions of responsibility in the Babylonian Empire.

When Nebuchadnezzar erected a golden idol on the plain of Dura, the three young men refused to worship it as the king had commanded, even though he had stipulated: "*whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace*" (Dan 3:6).

When confronted by the king the three Jews insisted, "*Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up*" (Dan 3:17-18). They knew that God could deliver them and believed that He would. But if that was not His will, they would not lose faith: they still were not going to worship the idol.

"*And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and*

spoke, saying to his counselors, 'Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said to the king, 'True, O king.' 'Look!" he answered, 'I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like a Son of God'" (Dan 3: 23-25).

The angel of God who protected these young Jews is seen by the Church as a type of Christ, the One who walks among His people at all times, in the midst of every circumstance, even when God seems absent. It is He whose coming in the flesh we are about to celebrate.

Troparion and Kontakion (Dec. 17)

Faith can accomplish great things! Through it the three holy young men rejoice in the flames as if they had been in refreshing water; and Daniel in the midst of lions is like a shepherd among his sheep. Through their intercession, O Christ God, save our souls.

Armed with God's invisible power, you shunned the adoration of man-made idols, O thrice-blessed young men. Strengthened with this power beyond words, you stood in the midst of a devouring fire and called upon God, saying: "Hasten, O merciful One, and speed to our help, for You are good and have the might to do as You please."

Sunday before the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 11:9-10, 32-40 – Matthew 1: 1-25

FROM DECEMBER 20 TO 24 we observe a five-day "holy week" during which Christ's birth seems ever closer. This fore-feast of the Nativity culminates on December 24, the *Paramony* of the feast. During these days we focus on how the birth of the long-expected Messiah is at hand. As we sing during those days, "Today the Virgin is on her way to the cave where she will give birth to the eternal Word of God in an ineffable manner."

The hope that One would come to deliver God's people from their enemies is found throughout the Old Testament. In Numbers 24 we read a prophecy of Balaam, "*I see a star that rises out of Jacob, a stem that springs from Israel's root; one who shall lay low the chiefs of Moab, shall bring devastation on all the posterity of Seth*" (v.17). The "star rising out of Jacob" is a way of saying "a descendant of Jacob." As we read in Matthew's genealogy, Jesus was a descendant of Jacob.

This expected one was clearly a national leader who would deliver the Israelites from their enemies. Jewish people expected this kind of savior throughout their history. Some Jews, however, looked for more. They read God's promise to David to mean that the kingdom of his son Solomon would endure forever: "*When your days are ended, and you are laid to rest beside your fathers, I will grant you for successor a son of your own body, established firmly on his*

throne. He it is who shall build a house to do my name honor. I will prolong forever his royal dynasty" (2 Sam 7:12-13). As we read in Matthew's genealogy, Jesus was a descendant of David.

The prophets deepened the Jews' understanding of just who the Messiah would be. We read in Isaiah 40, "*Tell the cities of Juda, See, your God comes! See, the Lord God is coming, revealed in power, with his own strong arm for warrant; and see, they come with him, they walk before him, the reward of his labor, the achievement of his task, his own flock! Like a shepherd he tends them, gathers up the lambs and carries them in his bosom" (*vv. 10, 11). The promised One is the Lord Himself, our Good Shepherd.

The Tree of Life

Every day during the fore-feast of the Nativity we sing the following troparion: *Bethlehem, make ready for Eden has been opened for all. Ephrata, be alert for the Tree of Life has blossomed forth from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb had become a spiritual Paradise, wherein the divine Fruit was planted – and if we eat of it we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning.*

Like much of our liturgical hymnody, this troparion incorporates a theme drawn from the writings of the Church Fathers: *"The Fruit of righteousness and the Tree of Life is Christ. He alone, as man, fulfilled all righteousness. And with His own underived life He has brought forth the fruits of knowledge and virtue like a tree, whereof they that eat shall receive eternal life, and shall enjoy the tree of life in paradise, with Adam and all the righteous"*(St Hippolytus of Rome, Commentary on Proverbs).

In the Genesis story of creation the Tree of Life was the giver of immortality from which fallen man could not be allowed to eat (see Gen 3:22). Were he to do so, Genesis suggests, sin would live forever. For us, however, Christ is the source of our immortality. He is the Tree of Life and, sinners though we are, we are called to eat of this Tree and live forever.

We also find the Tree of Life in the last chapter of Revelation. There the Tree is in the center of the New Jerusalem, the ultimate Paradise. For St Augustine and other Fathers, "Paradise is the Church, as it is called in the Canticles…the Tree of life is the holy of holies, Christ…" (St Augustine, *The City of God*). Christ, at the heart of the Church, gives us life through the Holy Spirit who works in the Church.

In our troparion Christ is called the Fruit planted in the spiritual paradise of the Virgin's womb. As Mary's cousin Elizabeth proclaimed – with countless generations after her – "*Blessed is the Fruit of your womb!*" (Lk 1:42)

The Paramony of the Nativity

Usually translated as vigil or eve, *paramony* actually refers to the *uninterrupted* nature of the Church's prayer on this day. During the day the lengthier Great Hours or Royal Hours are chanted.

The ***Royal Hours*** replace the ordinary First, Third, Sixth and Ninth Hours, served every day in Byzantine practice. They contain some different psalms as well as readings from both the Old

and New Testaments. While for most of the year the Hours are "cell services" – without choral responses or accompanying ritual, meant to be served by monastics in their cells (or by anyone at work or at home), the Royal Hours are served solemnly in church with hymns, Scripture readings and ceremony, concluding with the Typika. The name "Royal Hours" comes from the practice of the Great Church in Constantinople. The emperor and his court would attend the Hours on these days, emphasizing their importance in the life of the Church.

The Royal Hours are served on the Paramony of Christmas, the Paramony of the Theophany and on Great and Holy Friday, which we might call the "Paramony of Pascha." In addition, some Greek Churches serve the Royal Hours on the Eve of Pentecost as well, but without fasting.

At the Christmas Royal Hours the following prophecies are read. Each one has found fulfilment in the Nativity of Christ:

Micah 5:2-4 "But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me
the One to be Ruler in Israel."

Baruch 3:36-4:4 "Wisdom has appeared on earth, is at home with mortals… what pleases God has been revealed to us!"

Isaiah 7:10-16 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Isaiah 9:6-7 "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; the government will be upon His shoulder and His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

A Day of Fasting

The Paramony is a strict fast day. Many people don't eat anything until the evening. This is why the Divine Liturgy is not served until the end of the fasting day, when it is joined to a more elaborate than usual Great Vespers. As on other fast days, the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil is prescribed for Christmas Eve.

In the fullest observance a special service of Great Compline with a Litia for the feast ends the day. Sometimes this leads directly into the Orthros and Divine Liturgy of December 25. The same order is also prescribed for the Eve of the Theophany.

In some countries of Eastern Europe the Paramony culminates with a Holy Supper of twelve vegan courses representing the apostles. In the Balkans wheat pies and kutia (boiled wheat) are popular on this day.

Come, O Bethlehem, and prepare a birth-place with the most precious manger and the God-bearing swaddling-bands, in which our Life was wrapped. Come, O Joseph, and register yourself with Mary! Christ our God breaks asunder the bonds of death, enfolding men in incorruption.

Prepare yourself, O Bethlehem! Adorn yourself well, O manger! The Truth has come! Receive Him, O cave! The shadow has passed away, and God has appeared to men through the Virgin, assuming our form and deifying our flesh. Wherefore, Adam is restored, and cries out with Eve: Blessing has appeared on earth to save our race!

Son of God, Son of Man (Matthew 1: 1-25)

RESEARCHING FAMILY HISTORY has become a favorite pastime for many Americans seeking to discover their roots. One reason for this resurgent interest is that, for many, family history was ignored for so long. Many Americans see themselves as forward-looking rather than fixated on their past. The growing interest in genealogical research shows that at least some Americans want to know where they came from.

In more traditional societies one's family tree may be a source of pride or amusement, but it is always an object of interest. Little wonder, then, that the first Christians displayed an interest in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ. They had encountered Him healing the sick and touching their hearts. They knew Him as the One who forgave sins, raised the dead and rose Himself. They looked to His ancestry to discover more who He really was.

"Son of David, Son of Abraham"

St. Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy of Christ (Mt 1:1-16); it is the passage we read each year on the Sunday before Christmas. The first words of the passage – *biblios geneseos Iisous Christos* – translated literally as "the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ" – would remind the reader of the entire sweep of Jewish history by harkening back to Genesis, the first Book of the Torah. They would realize that Christ was both the beginning and the climax of God's dealing with the human race, starting in the Garden.

Matthew's genealogy portrays Christ as descended from David through the house of Joseph, His adoptive father. Since the time of King David (tenth century BC) Jewish rulers had based their authority on their connection to David. The awaited Messiah was portrayed in Jewish tradition as the "son of David" for a similar reason: to show that he, like David, was anointed by God to be Israel's deliverer.

In this passage Jesus' ancestry is traced back another millennium to the patriarch Abraham with whom God had made His first covenant with the ancestors of the Jewish people. For the first Christians, portraying Jesus as the son of Abraham meant that He was the personification of the nation, heir to the promises made by God to Abraham and to his seed, "*who is Christ*" (Gal 3:16).

Commentators have pointed out other aspects of this passage which reflect the early Church's faith in Christ. In this listing of fathers and sons we find two women – and foreign women at that. Jesus is not only son or Abraham and David. He is son of all mankind: Jew and Gentile, male and female, truly one of us in the flesh.

Finally, we note that besides being an exercise in genealogy, this passage is also built on numerology: the significance of numbers in the narrative it recounts. The ancestry of Christ is divided into three groups of fourteen, the numerological equivalent of "David." Several less than worthy individuals are removed from the Old Testament lists to come up with this number, leaving us with a catalog of the righteous ancestors of Christ. This grouping also alludes to the 28-day lunar cycle. Like the star of Bethlehem, the moon is introduced to show the cosmic significance of Jesus' birth.

These interpretations suggest that Matthew's genealogy is an example of what Pope Benedict XVI, in his three-volume work *Jesus of Nazareth*, called "interpreted history": based on events that actually happened, but as they were "interpreted and understood in the context of the Word of God."

"Son of Adam"

St Luke's Gospel also contains a genealogy: one with a different placement and a different emphasis. While Matthew connects Jesus' lineage with the story of His birth, Luke places it in the context of His hearer's idea of Him. "*Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed), the son of Joseph, the son of…*" (Lk 3:23). And while Matthew emphasizes the connections between Jesus, David and Abraham, Luke traces Jesus' lineage back to "*Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God*" (Lk 3:38). Luke, of Gentile origin, traces Christ back to the beginnings of the human race, stressing His connection with all mankind. Jesus is not only a son of Israel but of the entire human race.

Many commentators have noted other discrepancies between these genealogies which would be contradictory if these passages were not "interpreted history." Thus St. Ambrose sees Matthew showing Christ's royal family heritage and Luke stressing his priestly connection. "We should not consider one account truer than the other," he writes, "but that the one agrees with the others in equal faith and truth. According to the flesh, Jesus was truly of a royal and priestly family, King from kings, Priest from priests" (*Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Luke*, 87-88).

Fr John Custer summarizes another theological message in this passage. "Adam has no other 'father' but God and no 'mother' but the virgin earth from which he was taken. Adam became a 'living being when God breathed into him (Gen 2:7). All this resembles the Holy Spirit overshadowing the Virgin Mary in the conception of Jesus, whose only true father is God" (*The Holy Gospel, a Byzantine Perspective*, p. 408).

"In the Beginning Was the Word"

While not offering a genealogy in the same sense, St John's Gospel begins with another Genesis-like statement on the Lord's origins. Using the same opening words as the Book of Genesis (definitely not an oversight), John tells us that "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through Him, and without him nothing was made that was made*" (Jn 1:1). The Son of God became incarnate in time (Jn 1:14 – "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*.") but even before that, before time, He was with the Father as His eternal Son.

Thus the Gospels present us with a panoramic vision of the eternal Word become one of us: Son of Abraham and David, son of Seth and Adam, King and Priest, the only-begotten Son of the Father, of whose fullness we have all received.

Canon of the Fore-feast, Ode 3

THE SON WAS BORN INEFFABLY of the Father before all ages. And in these last days, He has willed to be incarnate of the Virgin Mary without seed. Let us lift up our voices to the Lord and say: "You have lifted us up from our fallen state. Holy are You, O Christ our God!"

~The Son was born ineffably of the Father before all ages. We sing to Him! And in these last days, He has willed to be incarnate of the Virgin Mary for He willed to lift up the human race which fell through the deadly advice of the serpent.

~He who is enthroned in the highest Heaven with the Father and the Holy Spirit saw the humiliation of the human race. The Son of the Father, without beginning, enters into time. Behold, He allows Himself to be born in the flesh as man!

~The All-Holy One who surpasses the angels and all creation in holiness now gives birth in the flesh to the Messenger of the Father, the Angel of His Great Counsel, in order to lift up those who ceaselessly sing, "Holy are You, O Christ our God!"

Does God Speak through Our Dreams?

EVERYONE DREAMS, we are told, but not everyone remembers all their dreams. Some dreams have been described as powerful experiences, portraying a numinous presence with clarity, intensity and vividness.

Since dreams are so much a part of everyone's life, they have been the objects of study for millennia, from Babylonian astrologers to contemporary psychologists. Many people today recount dreams of their departed relatives, angels and saints. Is belief in dreams compatible with the Christian faith?

Religious interpretation of dreams has figured in all Middle Eastern religions including Christianity. It has been said that approximately one-third of the Bible is devoted to dreams, visions, prophetic calls and angelic visitations. The patriarch Jacob, for example, dreamed of a ladder reaching to heaven and sanctified that place as Bethel, the house of God (Gen 28:11-19). It was in a night vision that Jacob heard God's call to take his people into Egypt (Gen 46:1-4). It was by interpreting their kings' dreams that Joseph rose to prominence in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of four dreams experienced by Joseph, the spouse of the Theotokos. In the first dream he learns of the conception of Jesus (Mt 1:20-21); in another he is told to flee Herod's wrath and go to Egypt (Mt 2:13). Joseph brings his family back from Egypt after

Herod's death as the result of a dream (Mt 2:19-20) and settles in Nazareth after another (Mt 2:22-23).

In Acts we are told that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost will result in dreams and visions, as the prophet Joel foretold (Joel 2:28-29). Dreams by or of the saints have been reported from earliest days of the Church until today. In the second century *The Martyrdom of Ignatius* testified that St Ignatius of Antioch subsequently appeared to some eyewitnesses of his death. "*It came to pass, on our falling into a brief slumber, that some of us saw the blessed Ignatius suddenly standing by us and embracing us, while others beheld him again praying for us…*" In the fourth century St Monica, mother of the Blessed Augustine, was grieving over her son's immoral lifestyle. She then had the following dream: she saw herself praising God in heaven and her son worshiping with her. Her son was ultimately converted and is now, along with his mother, glorified among the saints.

The Sources of Dreams

Dreams arise from a variety of causes and have been classified by many Christian writers as follows.

- *Dreams of purely human origins* – What we have on our minds, good or bad, might surface as a dream. Some dreams, as contemporary psychiatrist Karen Horney writes in her book *Self-Analysis*, may be the voice of our aspirations. Others, as St Gregory of Sinai attested in the tenth century, are the result of too much food!
- *Dreams of supernatural origin* – Not every "spiritual" dream is godly. The Scriptures record incidents of false prophets basing their ideas on dreams and on God's response. "'*Do I not fill heaven and earth?' says the Lord. 'I have heard what those prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed"*'" (Jer 23:24-25). Such dreams may urge a person to commit ungodly acts or embrace a false belief, to see ourselves as singled out for unique blessings or cause us to despair.

Other dreams have a godly origin and purpose as the lives of some saints attest. In nineteenth century Italy a nine-year old John Bosco dreamed of Christ and His mother showing him a crowd of "… animals: goats, dogs, cats, bears and a variety of others.

"'This is your field, this is where you must work,' the Lady told me. 'Make yourself humble, steadfast, and strong. And what you will see happen to these animals you will have to do for my children.'

"I looked again; the wild animals had turned into as many lambs, gently gamboling lambs, bleating a welcome for that Man and Lady.

"At this point of my dream I started to cry and begged the Lady to explain what it all meant because I was so confused. She then placed her hand on my head and said: 'In due time everything will be clear to you.'

"After she had spoken these words, some noise awoke me; everything had vanished."

The boy would devote his life to working with street children, establishing schools and forming teachers to staff them.

So Should I Believe in My Dreams?

While it is clear that God can and does speak to people in dreams, none of us should presume that we are equipped to discern or judge whether a dream is of God or not. Saints and elders throughout the ages counsel us to be wary of judging that a dream is the voice of God. "*He who believes in dreams is completely inexperienced,*" says St. John Climacus, "*but he who distrusts all dreams is a wise man*" *The Ladder*, step 3.

If we are convinced we have had a godly dream, advise Saints Barsanuphius and John, "*Strive to receive an interpretation of its significance from the Saints, and do not believe your own idea.*" "The Saints" here include those Fathers and elders throughout the centuries who have taught the Church about the ways God communicates with us. It also includes those whom we can consult personally for advice on how to consider our dreams.

We should respond to powerful dreams the same way we deal with other areas of our spiritual life: by consulting with our spiritual guide. Someone who knows the Tradition and who knows us equally well can often discern whether our dreams are of God, of our own devising, or of demonic powers. This guide can be wrong and misjudge a godly dream; but if the dream reflects God's will for us, God surely will find another way to make His will clear to us.

St. Nicholas and the Emperor

Another dream celebrated in our Tradition concerns St. Nicholas. When three officers had been unjustly accused to the emperor and condemned to death, Nicholas "appeared for the defense" in dreams, securing their release.

When you appeared in a dream to Constantine the King and to Evlavios, you gave them this warning: "Release at once from prison those you have unjustly confined; for they are innocent – no murder did they commit as you claim. O King, listen to me; or else I shall call upon the Lord!" (*Vespers sticheron, December 6*)

December 24 – Paramony (Eve) of the Holy Nativity

Christmas Trees and the Gospel of Christ

CHRISTMAS TREES ARE EVERYWHERE: in homes and churches, parks and stores, offices and government buildings. In an age when people have fought to keep crèches in (or out of) public spaces, few seem to have challenged the presence of Christmas trees in those same venues. After all, the crèche is "religious" and the tree is not. Right?

As to its origin, that statement is true. The decorated trees introduced in Estonia and Latvia in the fifteenth century had no Christian significance. They were the focus for revelry: people sang and

danced around the tree much as the English did around the maypole. The first decorations were tidbits – fruit, nuts, paper flowers – which the children were given on Christmas Day. In Germany and other European countries where a non-liturgical Protestantism was dominant, there was little in the way of religious customs on the holiday. The Christmas tree, which spread from Germany into western Europe and eventually throughout the world, was more a symbol of holiday cheer than a commemoration of the nativity of Christ.

The Tree of Life

What opponents of Christian Christmas symbols do not realize, however, is that the tree was a symbol of Christ long before the Germans introduced it into their holiday observances. Furthermore, it is a more richly symbolic presentation of our faith in Christ than the merely historic picture painted in crèches. It not only says that Christ has come; it proclaims what His coming means for us.

During the last week of the Nativity Fast, a kind of "holy week" observed before Christmas in the Christian East, we sing the following troparion at every service:

Bethlehem, make ready for Eden has been opened for all. Ephrata, be alert for the Tree of Life has blossomed forth from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb had become a spiritual Paradise, wherein the divine Fruit was planted – and if we eat of it we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning.

Like much of our liturgical hymnody, this troparion incorporates a theme drawn from the writings of the Church Fathers. We find its imagery in the Commentary on Proverbs of the third-century Father, St Hippolytus of Rome:

"The Fruit of righteousness and the Tree of Life is Christ. He alone, as man, fulfilled all righteousness. And with His own underived life He has brought forth the fruits of knowledge and virtue like a tree, whereof they that eat shall receive eternal life, and shall enjoy the tree of life in paradise, with Adam and all the righteous."

The hymn is built upon a pair of images taken from the Scriptures. In the story of creation in Genesis the Tree of Life was the giver of immortality from which fallen man could not be allowed to eat (see Gen 3:22). Were he to do so, Genesis suggests, sin would live forever. For us, however, Christ is the source of our immortality. He is the Tree of Life and, sinners through we are, we are called to eat of this Tree and live forever.

We also find the Tree of Life in the last chapter of Revelation, the last chapter of the Bible. There the Tree is in the center of the New Jerusalem, the ultimate Paradise. For St Augustine and other Fathers, "Paradise is the Church, as it is called in the Canticles…the Tree of life is the holy of holies, Christ…" (St Augustine *The City of God).* Christ, at the heart of the Church, gives us life through the Holy Spirit who works in the Church.

In the troparion Christ is also called the Fruit of this Tree planted in the spiritual paradise of the Virgin's womb. This brings us to the Gospel story of Christ's conception where Mary's cousin Elizabeth proclaims – with countless generations after her – "*Blessed is the Fruit of your womb!*" (Lk 1:42)

Restoring the Likeness

Finally the troparion returns to the imagery in Genesis to give us the spiritual purpose of Christ's incarnation. *"Christ is coming forth to bring back to life the likeness that had been lost in the beginning."* Many Fathers saw in Gen 1:26 a key to understanding the mystery of our existence. There God resolves, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*." They saw in the word *image* the range of qualities that set us apart from the lower creation: a resemblance to God in our nature. This remained in us after the fall, although in a damaged or scarred way. In the term *likeness* they saw the resemblance to God by our behavior, which had been lost through sin. We may still look somewhat like God (the image in us) but we surely don't act like Him.

In His own person Christ is the perfect likeness to God. "*He who sees me sees the Father*," we read in Jn 14:9. He is the new Adam, who starts humanity anew in Himself and gives us a share in His renewed nature. In His incarnation He assumed our human nature so that we might share in His divine likeness. In the words of the patristic adage, "*God became man so that man might become God*."

If they knew the Christmas tree as the symbol of Christ, the Tree of Life, secularists might happily welcome the mangers and cribs and shepherds and animals of the creche in the public sector and strive to banish Christmas trees instead!

December 25 – The Nativity of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ

Galatians 4:4-7 – Matthew 2:1-12

Christ is Born – Glorify Him!

OUR NATURE HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED in Christ… our nature is being transformed in Christ… our nature will be transformed in Christ. At first glance this may seem like a grammar exercise about verbs. In fact it is a summary of theology: exploring the magnitude of the mystery which is Christ in us.

Christ's Coming Has Transformed Us

The focus of our Christmas celebration is most often on the Gospel narratives of Matthew and Luke. They speak of the trip to Bethlehem, the angels and shepherds, the magi and the star. But from the earliest days of the Church believers have seen the birth of Christ containing, as it were, the whole life and death of Christ as a seed. His acceptance of our human nature necessarily includes His acceptance of the cross and death, and His renewal of mankind by His resurrection.

In the same way our decision to have children must include the decision to accept the Terrible Twos, the Traumatic Teens, and all that follows.

For many religious people, when something holy comes into contact with something profane the holy thing becomes defiled. This principle is found in Judaism and Islam and accounts for the ritual washings and similar practices in these religions. The message of the Gospel, however, is that when the Holy One, the Son of God, comes into contact with something profane it is the profane thing which is changed. It is sanctified by contact with the holy. God is not defiled by His fallen creation; His creation is transformed when He enters into it in Christ. As described by St Gregory of Nyssa, "The Word in taking flesh was mingled with humanity, and took our nature within Himself, so that the human should be deified by this mingling with God: the stuff of our nature was entirely sanctified by Christ, the first-fruits of creation" (*Against Appolonarius*, 2).

By taking on our humanity the Word of God assumes all that we are, except sin, so that we can become by grace what He is by nature, children of the Father. Our nature is transfigured in Him. It is divinized or deified. As St Gregory the Theologian boldly expressed it, "He took our flesh and our flesh became God, since it is united with God and forms a single entity with Him" (*Third Theological Oration*).

Our society, and contemporary culture in general, is committed to the value and freedom of the individual. We recognize that each person has worth in himself or herself and this is good. But a stress on individualism inevitably leads to the separation of peoples from one another. At worst, people are alienated from society, from God, from one another. At the least, we find it hard to see the communal dimension to the incarnation: that the entire human race is irrevocably changed because the Son of God has come into it.

Christ's Presence Transforms Us

"*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Mt 28:20). These final words of Christ to His disciples before His ascension affirm His continuing presence with us. His physical presence was limited in time; His spiritual presence will last as long as time itself will last.

The focus on Christ's spiritual presence is His Body, the Church. It is the mystery or sacrament of the risen Christ, which – like all sacraments – reveals His presence behind a veil. The Church is the world being transformed in Christ; at the same time it is Christ transforming the world.

The faithful, insofar as they are living a life of repentance, seeking to model their lives on Christ's, are the world being transformed. The faithful, insofar as they celebrate Christ's presence in the Scriptures, in baptism, the Eucharist and the other mysteries – including the mystery of love for others – are Christ transforming the world. The saints are those who witness by their lives that we can be transformed and transform others in Him.

Christ's presence in the Scriptures was at first practically limited to its public reading in the assembly. People would listen carefully so as to memorize what they heard. Only the wealthy could afford hand-copied Scriptures for their personal use. In addition Books of Scripture, particularly the Gospels, would be richly adorned, carried in procession and offered for veneration, reminding believers that Christ was truly in them. Since the invention of printing the

Scriptures have become increasingly available; as a result we may not be as quick to recognize the divine presence in a paperback Bible as in the Gospel on the holy table.

What enables us to experience the presence of Christ when we read the Scriptures – or, for that matter, when we assist at the Liturgy or other mysteries? St Isaac the Syrian offers the following advice: "Never approach the words of the mysteries that are in the Scriptures without praying and asking for God's help. Say, 'Lord, grant me to feel the power that is in them.' Reckon prayer to be the key that opens the true meaning of the Scriptures" (*Ascetical Treatises*, 73).

Even more hidden to us is the presence of Christ in others. This presence calls silently for us to acknowledge Him, a call that we often are too deaf to hear. Some, like Mother Teresa and others like her, can hear that call and they become the light and salt of the Gospel sayings. The presence of these saints with their acute hearing of Christ's voice is one of the signs that Christ is transforming the world even now.

Christ's Return Will Transform Us

"*Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing*" (2 Tm 4:8). St Paul expresses here his hope in the final transformation of "all who have loved His appearing."

Like St. Paul we await our ultimate transformation at Christ's return. As the Church celebrates Christ's appearing in the flesh (the Nativity) and His appearing in power at the Jordan (the Theophany), we are reminded that Christ's first coming would find its ultimate fulfillment only in His second coming.

"In His first coming He was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger. In His second coming He is clothed with light as with a garment.

In His first coming He bore the cross, despising its shame; He will come a second time in glory accompanied by the hosts of angels.

It is not enough for us, then, to be content with His first coming; we must wait in hope of His second coming. What we said at His first coming, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,' we shall repeat at His last coming..."

From the *Catecheses* of St. Cyril of Jerusalem

The Christmas Carol: Our New Song

"*SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG: His praise in the assembly of saints. Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King*" (Psalm 149:1, 2). This psalm is heard at

every Orthros service throughout the year. We may know the words by heart, but do we know why we should sing a "new song" – won't the old favorites do?

A new song is, in a sense, like a new outfit. It expresses a new beginning in the life of a person or a community. Thus some commentators think this psalm was written to celebrate King David's conquest of Zion where he established his capital of Jerusalem – certainly a new beginning for David and his kingdom.

Other new beginnings in the Old Testament, such as the bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and the establishment of regular worship there (see Ps 95, 1 Chr 16:23-33), occasioned new songs. In Is 42:10 people are enjoined to "*Sing to the LORD a new song, His praise from the ends of the earth*" as the Jews prepare to return to their homeland after their captivity in Babylon. But the newest of the new songs in the Bible are found, not in the Old Testament but in the New where they celebrate new beginnings that surpass any others in the history of Israel.

New Songs in the Gospel

The Gospel of Luke records four "new songs" which have become part of our Church's liturgy since the earliest days. All of them are connected with the coming of Christ into the world. They are:

The Canticle of Mary (Lk 1:41-56) – This song is placed in Mary's mouth in the Gospel story of her visit to Elizabeth. It is reminiscent of several Old Testament hymns, especially the "song of Hannah" (1 Samuel 2:1-10), a prayer giving thanks to God for the birth of her son, Samuel.

Mary's Canticle gives thanks because God "*has regarded the humility of His hand-maid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed because He that is mighty, has done great things to me; and holy is His name*," alluding to her conception of Christ. Its last lines – "*He has received Israel his servant, being mindful of his mercy: as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever*" – received new meaning in light of the Gospel. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ.

This Canticle is thought to be the earliest Marian hymn used by the Church. It is found in the daily services of all the historic Churches of East and West. In the Byzantine rite this hymn is regularly sung at Orthros.

The Canticle of Zachariah (Lk 1: 67-79) – This song of thanksgiving is uttered in the gospel by Zechariah on the occasion of the birth of his son, John the Baptist. Like the Canticle of Mary, this hymn also refers to "*The oath, which he swore to Abraham our father*" which is now fulfilled as God has "*visited and wrought the redemption of His people; and has raised up a horn of salvation to us, in the house of David his servant*." This image, a "horn of salvation," probably alludes to the might of a steer, the leader of a flock. Applying this image to John indicates that he fulfills the biblical prophecy that "*I will make the horn of David grow; I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed*" (Ps 132:17). As the Forerunner of Christ John would be "*the burning and shining Lamp*" as Jesus described him (Jn 5:35), powerfully calling the people to repentance.

The canticle employs another image, this time for Christ whom John announced. "*The Orient from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to*

guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:78-79). The One who rises from the east is the sun, enlightening those in the dark. The ultimate sun, we may say, is the Lord Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness. This image is also used in the troparion for Christmas, alluding to Christ as the One who led the Magi from the East to be the first Gentiles to worship Him:

> Your nativity, O Christ our God, has shed the light of knowledge upon the world. Though it those who had been star-worshippers learned through a star to worship You, O Sun of Righteousness, and recognize in You the One who rises from on high. O Lord, glory to You!

The Canticle of Zachariah may be heard at Orthros on certain days.

The Hymn of the Angels (Lk 2:14) – The announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds concludes with these words: "*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men*!'"

The prophet Isaiah foretold that "*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given…and His name will be called … the Prince of Peace"* (Is 9:6). And so this proclamation that Christ, our peace, is on earth resounded through the early Church. "*He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation*" (Eph 2:14).

By the third century the Hymn of the Angels would be expanded into one of the most solemn chants of the Church. We find it in expanded form in the Great Doxology, sung at festal Orthros and in another form at daily Orthros. It was introduced in the West in the fourth century and is heard in a slightly different form at festal Masses. In a sense this song represents the entire liturgy of the Church as now reconciled to God and one another in Christ, we join the angels in the worship of God.

The Canticle of Simeon (Lk 2:29-32) – The fourth New Testament canticle is uttered by Simeon the Just when he greets the infant Christ in the temple. Here too we see Christ proclaimed as the One who reconciles Jew and Gentile in a new people of God. Simeon declared Him to be "*A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel*."

This canticle is sung every day at vespers. It also forms a part of the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy, said as the priest removes his vestments.

The Ultimate New Songs

The New Testament records two other "new songs." We find them in the Book of Revalation. The first is Rev 5.9 where hosts of angels and all creation with them cry out: "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing ... Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!*" (Rev 5:12-13)

Finally we are told there is another song – the Song of the Chaste, who have died to the world to follow Christ. "*They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These*

were redeemed from among men, being first-fruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God" (Rev 14:3-5).

A Byzantine Nativity Hymns

Heaven and earth are united today, for Christ is born. Today God has come upon earth, and man has gone up to Heaven. Today for man's sake is seen in the flesh He who by nature is invisible. Therefore let us give glory and cry aloud to Him: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, which Your coming has bestowed upon us, O Savior. Glory to You!" (*Lete*)

Saturday after the Nativity

Shining the Light of Knowledge (Mt 12: 15-21)

IN THE SERVICES PREPARING US for the Feast of the Nativity and on the feast itself there are frequent readings from or references to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. On the Saturday after the feast we read a passage from the Gospel of St Matthew which also cites an Old Testament prophecy, but it is one not usually associated with the Nativity, as it appears only later in the Gospel. It is, however, one of the few prophecies which the Lord Himself says applies to Him.

The Hostility of the Pharisees

We have seen how the Pharisees reacted to the healings which Jesus performed on the Sabbath. They saw these actions as violating the rule that one should not work on the Sabbath. Two such "violations" are recorded in Mt 12. Verses 1-8 relate the incident in the grain fields on the Sabbath, when Jesus' followers plucked grain and ate it, to the chagrin of the Pharisees. Verses 9-13 tell how the Lord then went into a synagogue and healed a man with a withered hand. Matthew concludes these narratives by saying, "*Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him*" (v. 14).

In response to their hostility, we are told: "*But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there*" (v. 15). The Lord did not want a decisive confrontation with His adversaries; as stated elsewhere in the Gospels, His hour had not yet come. "*Yet He warned* [His followers] *not to make Him known, that might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet*…" (vv. 16-17).

And here the prophecy in Is 42:1-4 is quoted:

"Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen,
My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him,
and He will declare righteousness to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out,
nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.
A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth

righteousness to victory; and in His name Gentiles will trust."

The Chosen One

In applying this passage to Himself the Lord in effect answers the question, "Who is this newborn Child?" He assumes the titles *Servant* and *Chosen One* which in Isaiah are used repeatedly to refer to the Jewish people ("*Jacob my servant, Israel my chosen one*"). Many Jews still apply this verse to the people of Israel or even to the modern state of Israel. Jesus here is portraying Himself as ***personifying the People of God*** in a unique way. He is the embodiment of God's Israel; He represents all the hopes and expectations of those Jews who were looking for God to deliver them.

The Greek text of the Gospel adds another note by quoting Isaiah in the Septuagint (Greek) version. The early Christians believed that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Septuagint put forth the best interpretations of the sacred text. Thus, for example, while the Hebrew text of Is 7:14 reads, "*A young woman will conceive and bear a son…*" the Septuagint uses a Greek word for "young woman" which also means "virgin."

In the Septuagint version of Is 42 the word for "servant" is translated as ὁ παῖς (*o paees*). In the Greek of the day this word could mean *servant* or *child* depending on the context. The Gospel writer saw that Jesus completely fulfilled this prophecy because He was ***both God's servant and His Only-Begotten Son***.

Bearer of the Spirit

The next element in this prophecy which is fulfilled in Christ is the statement "*I will put My Spirit upon Him."* The Gospels ***connect Christ with the Spirit of God*** from the moment of His conception. When the Holy Virgin questions Gabriel as to how she could have a child, he answers "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God*" (Lk 1:35).

The Gospels show that the Holy Spirit was manifested at the Lord's baptism and in His encounter with the Tempter in the wilderness. When He returns to Nazareth and is given the Book of Isaiah to read in the synagogue, He selects the passage, "*The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor…*" Then, closing the book, He announces, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*" (Lk 4:16-22). Jesus is the One who bears the Spirit and will, after His resurrection, bestow this Spirit upon the Church.

A Light to the Gentiles

Another element in the prophecy which Matthew quotes is that the Chosen One is to "*declare righteousness to the Gentiles.*" ***He will bring the righteousness of God's People to those who are not of this People.*** The "Gentiles" were the surrounding peoples who worshipped the various gods and goddesses of the Middle East and the Greco-Roman world. To declare righteousness to them meant, for Jews like the Pharisees, that the Chosen People by observing the Law would make the Gentiles righteous by teaching them to observe the Torah as well.

An image used in the prophets to express this ministry is to ***bring light to the Gentiles***. As we read in Is 49: 6 "*I* [i. e. God] *will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*." Gentiles would receive salvation when they came to know the true God through the witness of the Jews.

In the Gospel as well, salvation comes from knowing the God of Israel. What the Gospel adds is that the true God is revealed in Christ. He is the true *"Light to bring revelation to the Gentiles*" (Lk 2:32) as Simeon said of the Infant Christ. Knowing the one true God in Christ is what brings salvation to the ends of the earth.

The fulfillment of this prophecy is what we proclaim every time we repeat the troparion of the Nativity: "Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge. Through it those who had been star-worshippers learned through a star to worship You, the Sun of righteousness and recognize in You the one who rises from on high. O Lord, glory to You!"

On Breaking the Bruised Reed (v. 20)

"Jesus was loved by God and was pleasing to His Father's will: the Spirit of God was upon Him. Righteousness was made known to the Gentiles by Him. The reed that was bruised was not broken and the smoking flax was not extinguished. This means that the frail, shaken Gentiles were not allowed to deteriorate completely but were preserved unto salvation.

"This was appointed for a fixed time: '*when He sends forth righteousness to victory*.' When the power of Death was removed at the return of His splendor [i.e. His resurrection] He would bring judgment to the Gentiles who would believe in His name through faith."
(St Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew* 12)

"Whoever does not stretch out a hand to a sinner and does not carry a brother's load breaks the bruised reed. And whoever despises the small spark of faith in children extinguishes the smoking flax. Christ did neither of these: He came to save those who were perishing."
(St Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 2)

Sunday after the Nativity
Joseph, Spouse of the Theotokos,
David the King, and James, the Brother of God
Galatians 1:13-19 – Matthew 2:13-23

Are There "Other Gospels"? (Gal 1:8)

AT EVERY DIVINE LITURGY the celebrant prays for the Church hierarchs in words such as these: "Graciously bestow them to Your holy Churches in peace, honor, safety health, long life, rightly dispensing the word of Your truth." This last phrase is actually taken from St. Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy: "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Tim 2:15).

When the verse is translated as "dispensing" or "imparting" the word of Your truth, it suggest the act of passing on the Gospel from the bishop to His Church. When the translation "*rightly dividing the word of truth"* is used, something more is suggested. The bishop's role is to separate the ideas circulating as "Gospel" into true and false, dividing one from the other. Anyone can say that their interpretation is faithful to the Tradition. It is the bishop's role, St Paul tells Timothy, to make a judgment and separate true from false teaching.

St Paul spent his life proclaiming Christ despite all kinds of hardships. He was indignant that others were proclaiming false teachings and attributing them to Christ and His Church. He wrote to the Galatians, "*I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel – which is not another – but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed*" (Gal 1:6-8). These "other gospels," which were no authentic gospel at all, were generally doctrines or practices from other traditions which some teachers were intermingling with the Gospel of Christ. The one St Paul found himself opposing most vigorously was that believers in Christ were required to be circumcised. People had to physically become Jews, its practitioners, taught, in order to unite to Christ.

St Paul had cleared his teaching with the chief Apostles (see Gal 1:18-19) but his opponents continued in their views until the Jerusalem Church, led by St. James, the "brother of God" as he is called, confirmed that circumcision was not necessary, only faith in Christ (see Acts 15:6-21). The Apostolic Church had rightly divided the word of truth, determining what was essential and what was not.

What Was Paul's Gospel?

The Gospel which Christ had preached was simple, according to the Evangelists. "*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel*" (Mk 1:15).

Paul's summary of the Gospel which he preached in 1Cor 15:3-8 tells us how he understood the kingdom of God to be at hand. *"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures: and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.*" It was in the death and resurrection of Christ that the kingdom of God was to be found.

Perversions of the Gospel

St. Paul did not hesitate to say that the promoters of circumcision in the Church were perverting the Gospel. Over the centuries a number of alternatives to the Gospel emerged: teachings which St Paul would surely have called "another gospel." Some of the following first millennium teachings about Christ were quickly discarded; others have been revived over the years by different sects.

Some of the early alternative gospels taught that:
- Jesus was the illegitimate son of Mary and Panthera, a Roman soldier (the Talmud);
- Jesus was born as man and later adopted as a "son of God"
- Jesus was not fully man: he had a human body and a divine mind;
- Jesus was created by God the Father and not equal to Him (Arianism);
- Jesus' physical body was only an illusion, therefore He did not die on the cross;
- Jesus' human nature was overwhelmed by His divine nature (Eutychianism);
- Jesus had two natures but only one will, the divine, therefore His humanity was incomplete (monothelitism);
- Jesus only seemed to die on the cross; instead God took Him to Himself (Islam)

The first centuries also saw the rise of teachings that denied:
- The value of the Old Testament (Marcionism);
- The value of marriage (Montanism);
- The true brokenness of our human nature (Pelagianism).
- The value of icons (iconoclasm);

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the rise of groups with their own alternative gospels which teach that:
- God is the physical father of Jesus. They are "one God" only in that they are united in spirit, mind and purpose (Mormons);
- Jesus is the incarnation of Michael the Archangel, God's first creation. He became Messiah only at His baptism (Jehovah's Witnesses);
- Jesus was one of the many good spiritual teachers like Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius and others who attained divinity (New Age groups).
- .

All of these tendencies we call heresies, from the Greek word *heteran* (other), as in "another gospel." These heresies spoke about God and Christ but not in ways deemed consistent with the Scriptures. They came from another source than divine revelation and ultimately were rejected by the Church. Bishops, gathered in councils, divided what they saw as true from false teachings and rejected the early heresies. Their summary of the true Gospel, the Nicene Creed, remains the unique statement of our common faith.

Our Dogmatic Hymns

For centuries the Eastern Churches have also used liturgical hymns to assert their teaching in the face of heresies. The following sticheron from the vespers of the Nativity proclaims the Gospel faith of the Church with clarity and thereby refutes many of the heresies mentioned above. St. Paul would have approved.

> Come, let us rejoice in the Lord! Let us proclaim the present mystery by which the partition has been broken and the flaming sword withheld: now shall the Cherubim let us all come to the Tree of Life. As for me, I am returning to the bliss of Paradise whence I had been driven by the original disobedience. Behold, the Image of the Father and His immutable Eternity has taken the form of a servant! He has come down to us from a Mother all-pure, and yet He has remained unchanged: He has remained true God as He was before, and has taken on Himself what He had not been, becoming Man out of His love for man. Wherefore, let us raise our voices in hymns and sing: "O God who was born of the Virgin, O our God, have mercy on us!"

The City of David

IN 1868 REV PHILIPS BROOKS, rector of an Episcopal church in Philadelphia, wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem" for his Sunday School. He had visited the Holy Land a few years earlier and he wanted to share something of that trip with his young parishioners. Could he have imagined that people would still be singing that simple tune today?

Rev Brooks was far from the first person to be intrigued by Bethlehem, an insignificant place by worldly standards but one of lasting religious importance to both Jews and Christians. First settled by the Canaanites over 1400 years before Christ, the town was called the "house of Lahama," a local fertility god. When the Israelites conquered the town during the first millennium BC they reinterpreted the name to mean "house of bread" (*beyt lehem*). Arab Palestinians, the local population today, call it the "house of meat" (*beyt laham*).

Bethlehem in the Old Testament

The first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible is in the Book of Genesis: "*So Rachel died and was buried on the road to Ephrath that is, Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day*" (Gen 35:19, 20)**.** Ephrath is a Hebrew word for "fertility," recalling the old Canaanite meaning of the name. The two names are often placed side by side in the Old Testament.

Jews consider Rachel's grave as one of their holiest sites. It is also revered by Christians and Muslims. The pillar marking the burial place of Rachel was replaced during the Ottoman era by a tomb-like shrine which remains as a place of pilgrimage today.

Rachel's connection with Bethlehem is noted in St Matthew's Gospel. Quoting Jeremiah 31:15, Matthew describes the mourning for the Holy Innocents as "*Rachel weeping for her children*" (Mt 2:18).

Home of Jesse, Father of David

The town is next described as the home of Jesse, the father of David, Israel's future king. The Prophet Samuel is sent there by God to identify the next king of Israel: "*Fill your horn with oil, and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons*" (1 Sm 16:1). Jesse parades his sons before Samuel but the prophet does not choose any of them. Finally, "*Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your young men here?' Then he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him. For we will not sit down till he comes here.' So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with bright eyes, and good-looking. And the LORD said, 'Arise, anoint him; for this is the one!' Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward*" (1 Sm 16:11-13).

David becomes an attendant to the current king, Saul. He is present when the Philistine warrior, Goliath, challenges the Israelites to send out a champion to face him. David volunteers and slays him with his slingshot.

Saul names David commander of his troops but David's growing popularity eventually turns Saul against him. It is only after Saul is killed by the Philistines that the leading men chose David as their king.

The highpoint of David's victorious reign is the capture of what would be his capital, Jerusalem, which would be then known as the city of David. The actual site of David's city, to the southeast of the present Old City of Jerusalem, has been excavated since the nineteenth century.

Bethlehem, City of David?

While Jerusalem is repeatedly called the City of David in the Old Testament, St Luke's Gospel is the only place in the Scriptures where Bethlehem is given that distinction. We are told that "*Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David…*" (Lk 2:4). Why does Luke identify Bethlehem in this way?

Luke gives Bethlehem, the city of David's birth, the royal title proper to Jerusalem to accentuate the paradox that, despite Jesus' humble origins, His is a royal birth. St Matthew does the same thing when he quotes the following prophecy of Micah: "*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting*" (Mi 5:2).

When St Luke uses the title "City of David" for Bethlehem he makes an unspoken comparison between Christ and His ancestor in the flesh. David was born a man of the soil who was later chosen to be king. Jesus was an eternal King who took upon Himself the humble circumstances of being born in a cave and laid in a manger. David is a shepherd who became a king. Jesus is a King, worshipped by the shepherds, David's successors. While David transcended his lowly birth, Jesus transformed His, making it the object of our songs.

The Basilica of the Nativity

One of the most important churches which the empress St Helena commissioned during her trip to the Holy Land in the early fourth century is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The site on which it was built had been revered for years by people in the area, as Origen attests: "If anyone wants further proof to convince him that Jesus was born in Bethlehem besides the prophecy of Micah and the story recorded in the Gospels by Jesus' disciples, he may observe that, in agreement with the story in the Gospel about His birth, the cave in Bethlehem where He was born is pointed out, with the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. What is shown there is famous in these parts, even among people alien to the faith, that indeed Jesus, who is worshipped and reverenced by the Christians, was born in this cave" (*Contra Celsum*, book I, chapter LI).

The church soon became one of the chief shrines in the Holy Land and a favorite destination of pilgrims. Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Life of Constantine* written in 335, notes that "the most pious Empress honored the Theotokos' pregnancy with wonderful monuments, embellishing the sacred cave with all possible splendor. And soon thereafter the emperor himself honored it with imperial offerings, adding to his mother's works of art with costly presents of silver and gold and embroidered curtains" (*Life*, 3.43).

The church built by St Helena – a rotunda overlooking the cave with an attached nave and atrium – was destroyed in the sixth century during a Samaritan rebellion against Roman rule. It was rebuilt by Emperor Justinian in 565 in the form which remains to this day: a Greek basilica-style church built over the underground Grotto of the Nativity, the shrine marking the traditional place of Christ's birth. A silver star under the altar, supposedly marking the "exact spot" where Christ was born, was added by the French in the eighteenth century.

The basilica itself is administered by the Greek Orthodox patriarchate, which shares control of the grotto with the Armenian and Roman Catholics Churches. There are several chapels on Manger Square, surrounding the basilica, the largest being the Latin Church of St Catherine of Alexandria. There are also Armenian, Greek, and Latin monasteries attached to the basilica.

December 29 – The Holy Innocents

ALL THE HISTORIC CHURCHES – Greek, Latin and Syriac – include in their liturgical observance of Christ's nativity (although on different days) a remembrance of the cruel slaughter of the Holy Innocents, the young boys of Bethlehem and the surrounding area slain on the orders of King Herod the Great. In our calendar December 29 is devoted to commemorating this tragic event.

In the Gospel of St Matthew this episode is described as a result of the visit of the wise men who came seeking the newborn king of the Jews. After King Herod had consulted with the chief priests and scribes, he sent the wise men to Bethlehem *"...and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and*

worship Him also'"(Mt 2:8).The wise men found the Child, offered Him their gifts, but "…*being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way*" (Mt 2:12).

The Gospel continues: " *Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: 'A voice was heard in Ramah – lamentation, weeping, and great mourning – Rachel weeping for her children refusing to be comforted, because they are no more"*" (Mt 2:16-18).

This passage in Matthew is the only reference in the Scriptures or in other records of the time to the slaughter of these children. This led many in the past two centuries to deny the historical character of the story. Others have pointed out that the tale perfectly reflects the character of Herod. At the beginning of his reign he had executed his second wife Mariamne, her brother and her mother as threats to his reign. In 7 BC Herod killed his own sons Alexander and Aristobolus for the same reason. In 4 BC his son Antipater suffered the same fate. In his *Saturnalia* the late pagan writer Macrobius (c.395-423) attributed the following remark on Herod's reputation to the Emperor Augustus, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

One reason why contemporary accounts do not mention the slaughter of the Innocents may be the insignificant number of boys killed. Although later descriptions number these victims in the thousands – one Coptic source refers to 144,000 – scholars today reckon the number to be no more than twenty or thirty, based on the estimated population of the area in the first century. We cannot imagine that the death of two or three dozen children would have attracted attention in an age in which thousands routinely died in earthquakes, invasions and the like.

The Tears of Rachel

Matthew connects the death of the Innocents with "*Rachel weeping for her children*," a reference which many today would not readily understand. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was connected with Bethlehem in Jewish lore. She died giving birth to her son Benjamin "…*and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which marks Rachel's grave to this day"* (Gen 35:19-20)**.**

Rachel's son Benjamin survived. Rachel did not live to weep for him. Rather the verse from Jeremiah quoted in the Gospel refers to Ramah, the area near Rachel's grave to which Jews were driven for deportation to Babylon in the sixth century BC. Rachel "wept" for the children of Israel lost to her in the Babylonian exile; now she "weeps" for the Innocents.

The Flight into Egypt

The Gospel tells us that, warned in a dream by an angel, Joseph took the Child and His Mother to Egypt, thus escaping Herod's wrath (see Mt 2:13-15). By way of commentary, Matthew closes his mention of their stay in Egypt with the words of Hosea 11:1, "*Out of Egypt I called My Son*."

Again, there is no other Scriptural mention of the Child Jesus in Egypt. Later writings describe in detail an elaborate itinerary through Gaza and Sinai and along the Nile to Old Cairo where the Lord and His family reputedly lived until the death of Herod. In some versions they are accompanied by St James, the Lord's Brother; in others by Salome, His midwife. Many of the details of the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt are chronicled in a manuscript by Pope Theophilus of Alexandria (AD 384-412), who is said to have received these details during an apparition of the Holy Virgin. The Coptic Orthodox Church continues to distribute an "official map" marking the places they visited on their journey.

Most famous of the many shrines along this route are the Abu Sergha (St. Sergius) Church and the St Mary's Church in Old Cairo. A nearby cave is reputedly the place which housed the Infant and His family.

A number of apocryphal writings from later periods describe this journey as a series of miracles wrought as the Lord passed through Egypt. Demons were expelled, the sick healed and idols shattered at the sight of Him. In one of these works, the sixth-century *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of Christ*, an idol testifies before falling to the ground, "The unknown God is come, the One who is truly God; nor is there any one besides Him who is worthy of divine worship; for He is truly the Son of God" (*Arabic Gospel* 4:11).

The New Moses, the New Israel

The passages in Matthew's Gospel which speak of the slaughter of the Innocents and the flight into Egypt form what the Jews call a *Midrash*, or homiletic story: here, a kind of commentary on the identity of Christ. He is the King of the Jews, feared by the tyrant Herod but recognized by the Persian sages. He is the new Israel brought out of Egypt. He is the new Moses saved from slaughter as an infant as Moses was (see Ex 1:22 ff.). Then He was sent home when the danger was past, as Moses was, "*Go, return to Egypt…for all the men who sought your life are dead"* (Ex 4:19, all but reproduced in Mt 2:20). This prepares us to see the adult Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as the new Lawgiver, giving added depth to the Law of Moses. Thus in Matthew 5:21 we see Jesus redefine Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. "*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire."*

How much of the story of Christ in Egypt is theological meditation and how much is history? It is certainly prudent to reject the medieval elaborations to the biblical narrative. As to the Gospel

core, we can, along with Pope Benedict XVI, accept it as both history and reflection until proven otherwise.

Seeking the hidden Treasure, the impious tyrant today sacrificed innocent children, and Rachel was left without comfort. Seeing the unjust slaughter and premature death of those whom she bewailed, her heart was broken. But now she is consoled, seeing them in the bosom of Abraham.

From the Vespers of December 29

January 1 – Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord
Colossians 2:8-12 – Luke 2:20-22, 40-52

OUR CELEBRATION OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY draws to a close today with the Feast of His Circumcision. Many primitive cultures have traditions of marking the body in some way to distinguish the recipient as a member of the tribe, a warrior, or a member of the ruling class. In the Middle East circumcision has been practiced as a sign of belonging at least since the time of Abraham. To this day it is a defining rite among both Jews and Muslims.

In the book of Genesis we read God's requirement: "*This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me. Throughout the ages, every male among you, when he is eight days old, shall be circumcised, including house-born slaves and those acquired with money from any foreigner who is not of your blood. Yes, both the house-born slaves and those acquired with money must be circumcised. Thus my covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting pact. If a male is uncircumcised, that is, if the flesh of his foreskin has not been cut away, such a one shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant…*" (Gen 17:10-14).

In accordance with this law the Lord Jesus was circumcised eight days after His birth. It was also the time that He was formally given the name Jesus. At first glance we see that in this Jesus' family was simply doing what was customary among Jews. They were making the infant a part of God's People, the people of the Covenant. By His incarnation the Word of God became a human being, one of us by nature. By His circumcision He became a member of a specific people, a Jew. He would observe the Sabbath, study Torah and observe the festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem (see Lk 2:41-52). He would observe the traditions of Israel because it was through Israel that the world would be saved. As we sing at vespers on this feast: *"The most merciful God did not disdain circumcision in the flesh. He offered Himself instead as a symbol and example of salvation to all. He made the Law, and yet submitted Himself to its commands and to what the*

prophets had foretold of Him. O our God, who hold all things in Your hands, and yet were wrapped in swaddling clothes: O Lord, glory to You!"

The Church, reflecting on His circumcision, looked at it from other vantages as well. St. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, in his third homily on the Gospel of St. Luke, noted: "It seems to me that circumcision achieved three distinct ends. In the first place, it separated the descendants of Abraham by a sort of sign and seal and distinguished them from all other nations.

"Second, it prefigured in itself the grace and efficacy of divine baptism. Formerly a male who was circumcised was included among the people of God by virtue of that seal; nowadays a person who is baptized and has formed in himself Christ the seal becomes a member of God's adopted family.

"Third, circumcision is the symbol of the faithful when they are established in grace, as they cut away and mortify the tumultuous rising of carnal pleasures and passions by the sharp surgery of faith and by ascetic labors. They do this, not by cutting the body but by purifying the heart. They do this by being circumcised in the spirit and not in the letter."

Our Spiritual Circumcision

A circumcision is a cutting of the flesh; circumcision according to the letter, as St Cyril describes it, is also a cutting, but of the heart. It is the removal of something, often painful, so that we can be fitting members of Christ by "the sharp surgery of faith and by ascetic labors."

The sharp knife of faith removes from our hearts its reliance on whatever we trust for our security other than the true God. In the Roman Empire Jews trusted in the Law of Moses and pagans trusted in the gods and goddesses of the state. In our day it may be our family, our job, our culture or our political and economic systems that we feel will take care of us. People continually find that any of these can fail them drastically if they put the confidence in them that is due to God alone.

The surgery of ascetic labors is the way we deal with our pride, our greed, our lust and the like: often particularly painful as it is a surgery we face daily. St. Paul described this dynamic as "… the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh" (Col 2:11). Elsewhere he catalogued these sins as "…your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5). Lest we feel too confident in our "sinlessness," he continues the list with "anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language" and lying (Col 3:8-9). Of these we continually need to be circumcised.

What Is "The Flesh"?

When speaking of "the sins of the flesh" St Paul uses a Greek word, *sarx*. This is not the Greek word for body – *soma* – which shows that the Apostle is not equating the body with sin. As the

fourth-century Egyptian ascetic Poemen said, "*We were taught, not to kill the body, but to kill the passions." Sarx* has been described as "the complex of sin, death and futility into which humanity has imprisoned itself…" (John S. Custer, *The Apostolic Writings*, p. 78). The term "flesh," then, includes anything including mental attitudes and even religious practices which are opposed to the kingdom of God.

Circumcising the flesh, in fact, involves dealing more with our motivations, our imaginations and the whole range of our conscious and subconscious thoughts. It is a refocusing of all our attitudes as well as our actions on God and the godly way of life. Asceticism, then, is the means by which we restore the natural hierarchy of body and spirit. The body is meant to serve the spirit; not the other way around, as is the case in the fallen world. Human nature in its fallen, sinful condition finds the spirit enslaved to the flesh, and to the need to gratify the appetites of the flesh. Insofar as the spirit remains in this state of bondage, it is rendered incapable of communing with God.

Spiritual circumcision, then, is an indispensable part of our progress toward union with God. It is an aspect of what we are urged to do continually in our liturgical services: "Let us commend ourselves, one another and our whole life to Christ God."

Hymns of the Feast

The most merciful God did not disdain circumcision in the flesh. He offered Himself instead as a symbol and example of salvation to all. He made the Law, and yet submitted Himself to its commands and to what the prophets had foretold of Him. O our God who hold all things in Your hands, and yet were wrapped in swaddling clothes: O Lord, glory to You! (*Vespers sticheron*)

O Merciful Lord who, being God, assumed our human nature without undergoing change, You fulfilled the Law by accepting to be circumcised in the flesh, so as to put an end to prefigurations and remove the veil of our passions. Glory to Your goodness, O Word! Glory to Your compassion! Glory to Your ineffable condescension! (*Troparion*)

January 1 – Feast of St Basil the Great

JANUARY 1 MARKS A DOUBLE FEAST in the Byzantine Churches. First of all, it celebrates the circumcision of Christ, which took place eight days after His birth. It is also the commemoration of St Basil the Great who died on this date in AD 379.

There are several saints given this title, "the Great," in our tradition such as St Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373), and St Leo the Pope of Rome in the fifth century. But who decides that a particular individual merits this designation? Was papal or imperial authority the deciding factor or was popular acclamation responsible?

Why is Basil Called "Great?"

In the case of St Basil, it was during his lifetime that people were describing him this way. His life-long friend, St Gregory the Theologian immortalized the term in the eulogy he wrote in Basil's memory and the entire Christian world adopted it.

Basil was what would centuries later be called a "Renaissance man," a person excelling in so many areas of thought and action. St Gregory the Theologian described him as well advanced in rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, geometry, astronomy, and medicine. His writings on a wide range of subjects over his lifetime bear witness to the breadth of his knowledge.

Basil was born into an old and wealthy Christian family in Asia Minor. His grandparents were Confessors for the faith, hiding for seven year in the forest of Pontus during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. Basil's father was a prominent rhetorician in Caesarea, the administrative center of Cappadocia (Kayseri, in central Turkey, today) and it is there that Basil began his education. He was further schooled in Constantinople and Athens among the sons of other aristocrats. As St Gregory described it, "He studied everything, more than others are accustomed to study a single subject. He studied each science in its very totality, as though he would study nothing else...He was a ship fully laden with learning, as much as is humanly possible."

A year after completing his studies Basil had what we might call a conversion experience. As he described it is a letter, "Suddenly I awoke as out of a deep sleep. I beheld the wonderful light of the Gospel truth, and I recognized the nothingness of the wisdom of the princes of this world" and devoted all his energies to the Christian life.

After a brief stab at the life of a solitary, Basil established a community on his grandmother's estate along the Iris River, gathering family members and friends in a fellowship of prayer and good works.

After about four years Basil was ordained a deacon (362) and a priest (365) for the service of the Church in Caesarea, the second see (protothrone) in the patriarchate of Constantinople. In 370 he was elected its bishop, a position he held until his death in 379.

We recall some of St Basil's endeavors in the following troparion sung on his feast: "Your voice has sounded all over the earth that accepted your preaching. You gave a divine explanation of doctrine and made clear the nature of creatures and set a rule of life for men. Holy father, kingly priest, intercede with Christ God to grant us great mercy."

A Rule of Life for Men

During Basil's years in the community he had established and for years after, he compiled and revised a number of principles to order their life together. These principles, the *Asketikon*, came to be known as the Rule of St Basil, and became the foundation of communal monasticism in Byzantine Churches. Most Byzantine monastic and religious communities to this day claim St Basil as their patron. Soon translated into Latin and Syriac, St Basil's Rule influenced monastic life in these Churches as well.

While his *Asketikon* set forth a way of life for monastics, St Basil's *Ethics* set forth the principles of the Gospel as applied to the clergy and catechists working in the Church. These eighty "rules of life" became the Church's guide to leadership for centuries.

Making Clear the Nature of Creatures

While St Basil had a background in the physical sciences of his day, he did not rely on them to "explain the nature of creatures." In his work, the *Hexameron*, he saw that the accounts in Genesis provided an insight into the origin of things which the theories of the ancient Greeks could not. "The philosophers of Greece have made much ado to explain nature, and not one of their systems has remained firm and unshaken, each being overturned by its successor. It is vain to refute them; they are sufficient in them-selves to destroy one another."

St Basil insisted that the Bible does not try to explain the material dimensions of creation; those things which are the province of the physical sciences are "passed over in silence, as useless." Rather, he says, Scripture stresses "that which edifies and perfects the soul:" the truth that God is the author of all things and that it is He who holds all things in being.

Explanation of Doctrine

During his days on the River Iris St Basil had begun editing and commenting on theological and Scriptural themes. His most important work was in defending the teachings on Christ and the Holy Spirit upheld at the first two ecumenical councils.

Despite these councils, these issues were not settled in the minds of many. The election of a pro-Arian emperor in 364 provided a major boost to those who rejected the councils in Cappadocia. St Basil spent his remaining years defending the Nicene faith in writings, such as his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, sermons (as bishop he preached twice daily) and even political maneuvering. He divided his diocese and promoted anti-Arians to these new bishoprics so that the conciliar position would be strengthened. Basil's determination went a long way toward eliminating Arianism in his province.

Kingly Priest

As bishop, St Basil did much to reform the liturgical life of his Church. He served the Liturgy daily and encouraged frequent Communion. His arrangement of the Liturgy influenced the imperial capital as well, and did much to give the Byzantine rite its particular character.

The "Divine Liturgy of St Basil" became the normative Eucharistic rite in Constantinople until the shorter Liturgy of St John Chrysostom all but replaced it. Byzantine Churches still serve this Liturgy ten times each year, including on St Basil's feast.

A Father to the Poor

Perhaps St Basil's most appreciated accomplishment in Cappadocia was the creation of the *Basiliad*, a complex facing the gates of Caesarea which included a hospital, a hospice for

travelers and a shelter for the homeless, regarded at the time as a wonder of the world. It enjoyed the patronage of the emperor and inspired similar complexes throughout the East.

Basil's concern for those in need has touched the hearts of believers ever since. Many have been inspired to works of charity by his words: "The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity that you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit" (Homily on Lk 12:13-21). No wonder Basil became one of the first non-martyrs widely venerated as a saint.

Sunday before the Theophany
2 Timothy 4:5-8 – Mark 1:1-8

WHO IS THE GREATEST SAINT after the Theotokos? Recent sentiment in the West looks to her spouse, St. Joseph, as its foremost representative of holiness. For the Eastern Churches, however, "the Lord's witness is enough" (troparion of St John). The liturgy here refers to the words of Christ concerning John, "*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptis*t…" (Mt 11:11) Thus John the Baptist is regularly depicted in the "Deisis" icons flanking Christ, opposite the Theotokos. This same grouping is found as the basic component of icon screens along with the icon of the church's patron.

A moving testimony to St John comes from the fourth-century Bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose. John, he writes, "…did not enlarge the boundaries of an empire. He did not prefer triumphs of military conquest to honors. Rather, what is more, he disparaged human pleasures and lewdness of body, preaching in the desert with great spiritual power. He was a child in worldliness, but great in spirit. He was not captivated by the allurements of life, nor did he change his steadfastness of purpose through a desire to live…" (*Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 1.31).

John in the Scriptures

John's unique holiness is displayed in the story of the Theotokos' visit to his mother Elizabeth. There the Gospel tells us that, at Mary's greeting, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (see Lk 1:39-45). The Gospel thus shows John as aware even in the womb of the greatness of Christ who had been conceived in the womb of Mary. Thus he fulfills the prophecy made by the angel Gabriel to John's father, Zachariah: "*He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*" (Lk 1:45).

Reflecting on this event, St Ambrose connects the experience of John in the womb with that of another prophet, Jeremiah. This prophet, who lived during the fall of Jerusalem and the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, describes God's call to him: "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations*" (Jer 1:5). While Jeremiah describes himself as consecrated before his birth, Luke describes John as nothing less than filled with the Holy Spirit.

John reappears in the Gospels as an adult, living in the Judean desert and baptizing at the Jordan. This "desert" was not what we consider desert; it was actually grazing land, useless for agriculture but able to sustain the sheep and goats and the occasional solitary who lived there.

Nothing is said in the Gospels about the intervening years of John's life, nor how he came to be in the desert. Some modern scholars have speculated that John was a member of the Essenes, a Jewish sect at the time which had retired to the desert and established a community there. Earlier lore, recorded in the fourth-century Life of John by Serapion of Thmuis, held that John was spirited away to the desert by his mother to escape slaughter when Herod's servants killed the Holy Innocents. In Serapion's Life, Elizabeth died when her son was seven years old; thereafter the boy was cared for by an ascetic in the desert.

The Ministry of John

St Mark's Gospel presents us with a thumbnail description of John as a Forerunner, preparing the way for One greater than he by calling people to "*a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" (Mk 1:4). In Matthew John is depicted preaching "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Mt 3:2). God's action in Christ was immanent; those in need of repentance had best make up their minds to do so.

Matthew singles out the Pharisees and Sadducees – the religious establishment – calling them a "*brood of vipers*" (Mt 3:7) most in need of repentance. He depicts the coming Messiah as One who "*will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor*" (we would say "clean house") burning up the unrepentant "*with unquenchable fire*" (Mt 3:11-12).

One image from the Gospels has found its way into many icons of John baptizing. John is described as warning, "*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree*s" (Mt 3:10; Lk 3:9), meaning that the house cleaning is about to begin. In many icons an axe is shown imbedded in a tree or tree stump to suggest this image.

In Luke specific examples for repentance are given in response to the question "*What shall we do?*" John tells the tax collectors not to extort more money than the tax law allows. He tells soldiers not to intimidate or accuse others falsely and to be content with their pay. And he tells everyone to give alms from what they have (see Lk 3:10-14).

In St John's Gospel, another note is added to the Baptist's message. He identified Jesus as the One who is coming and depicts his own work as a testimony to Jesus. "*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world …I came baptizing with water that He should be revealed to Israel*" (Jn 1:29, 31).

The Baptism of Repentance

Immersion into a stream, river or bathing pool (*Mikveh*) was practiced for ritual purposes in first century Judaism. Orthodox and many Conservative Jews continue the practice to this day. Ritual baths were necessary for Jewish men in preparation for Yom Kippur or the Sabbath, for entering the temple or ascending the Temple Mount. Women were required to bathe for ritual purity after childbirth or menstruation. Gentiles submitted to a ritual bath upon converting to Judaism.

Some differences between these ritual baths and John's baptism are obvious. Jewish ritual baths are self-administered; John baptized people into the water. Jewish baptism was a physical cleansing to achieve ritual purity; John's baptism was to signify repentance, a moral act. In John's time, Jewish people expressed repentance by offering sacrifices in the temple. Since the destruction of the temple, Jews express repentance by prayer, almsgiving or doing righteous deeds. "Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar both explain that as long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel, but now, one's table atones" (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot, 55a.). Hospitality to the poor had become the Jewish way of atoning for sins.

John's Baptism and Baptism into Christ

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read how St. Paul, "finding some disciples" in Ephesus, learned that they had never heard of the Holy Spirit. Hearing that they had been baptized with the baptism of John, St Paul explained: "*John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe in Him who would come after him, that is, in Christ Jesus*" (Acts 19:4).

Christian baptism is neither a kind or ritual purification or a symbol of repentance. It is the incorporation into the death and resurrection of Christ. Through faith we are buried with Him in baptism and then rise from the water with Him in the likeness of His resurrection. This effects an organic union with Christ in His Body the Church, a result never imagined by John. As we say at every baptism in the words of St. Paul (Gal 3:27), "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*."

Repentance and the Baptism of John (Mk 1:1-8)

Lord Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River. Its first verses introduce us to the figure of St John the Baptist whom it proclaims to be the fulfillment of two prophecies. The first prophecy is "*Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You*" (Mal 3:1). In this prophecy three characters are mentioned. The speaker is God who promises to send His messenger, whom the New Testament says is John the Baptist, and who prepares the way for the third person, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

The second prophecy quoted is Isaiah 40:3. "*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.*" The verses that follow describe John as a dweller in the wilderness, a kind of ascetic singularly dedicated to preparing for the One who would come to usher in the Kingdom of God. The Precursor coming before the One sent by God is a sign in the Old Testament that the Messiah is at hand. All four Gospels cite this prophecy as fulfilled in John who sets the stage for the appearance of the Lord Jesus.

John prepares for the coming of Christ by calling people to repentance. He was specific in identifying the faults of his hearers. He confronted the Jewish religious elite, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who felt that they did not need to repent: "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our

father.' For I say to you that God is able to

raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Mt 3:8-10). It is not enough, John told them, to be physically descended from Abraham; one must trust in God whole-heartedly as Abraham did.

The call to repentance continues in Luke's Gospel as people ask John, "'What shall we do then?' He answered and said to them, 'He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.' Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what is appointed for you.' Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, 'And what shall we do?' So he said to them, 'Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages'" (Lk 3:10-14).

To be ready for the Messiah people in authority could not bully those over whom they had power, and no one could ignore the poor and needy.

The Baptism of John

John contrasts his own ministry with that of the Messiah in several ways. One of them concerns baptism: "I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:8). Matthew and Luke have the same words but add, somewhat cryptically, "and fire."

Baptism in water was not unknown to first-century Jews. The Torah prescribes it for ritual purification in a number of cases such as contact with a corpse, discharge of blood or other fluids, or eating meat improperly slaughtered. Some people regularly immersed themselves before the high holydays. Converts to Judaism were also required to immerse themselves on joining the worshipping community. Orthodox Jews still practice these immersions today.

John had given a new twist to the ritual cleansing. His baptism was not concerned with ritual impurity but with repentance for moral failings like the faults mentioned in Mt and Lk quoted above. Also, people accepting this baptism did not immerse themselves; the rite was administered by John. Submission to the hand of the Baptizer was an act of humility expressive of whole-hearted repentance.

Baptism in Christ Jesus

At the beginning of His ministry the Lord Jesus also made use of the baptism of repentance. We read in the Gospel of St John that "…when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee" (Jn 4:1-3).

With His death and resurrection, however, baptism became a vehicle for the imparting of the Holy Spirit. Appearing to His disciples in the upper room, the risen Christ had bestowed His Holy Spirit upon His disciples unto the forgiveness of sins. Baptism would no longer be merely an expression of a person's repentance; it would actually convey the remission of sins by the power of the Holy Spirit. Believers in Christ would be baptized into His death and rise in His resurrection, becoming temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in Him and in His People.

Before His ascension Christ commissioned His followers to "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Mt 28:19, 20). The power of the Holy Spirit would enable them to begin a mission which is still being undertaken by the Church all over the world.

Early Christians recognized the difference between the baptism of John and baptism in Christ. We read in the Acts of the Apostles, "*…it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples, he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' So they said to him, 'We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism.' Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.' When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them…*" (Acts 19:1-5).

This passage also witnesses to the complementary element in baptism, the laying-on of hands, which we call chrismation.

The Baptism of John Today

Around the year 1290, an Italian Dominican, Fra Ricoldo Pennini, encountered a small group of people in Mesopotamia who called themselves Sabaeans, whom he described as "A very strange and singular people... Their writing is a sort of middle way between Syriac and Arabic. They detest Abraham because of circumcision and they venerate John the Baptist above all." In the sixteenth century Portuguese Jesuits came upon a similar group in Bahrain. Like the disciples St Paul met in Ephesus, this latter group of Sabaeans accepted baptism in Christ.

A tiny fragment of this people still exist called Mandaeans, who appear to have incorporated Gnostic beliefs into their tribal lore. They practice the baptism of John every Sunday at their worship service which has elements in common with Christian liturgy. No one is sure when this community came into being. Nor is it certain whether they will survive the current destruction of their homeland in northern Iraq.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness has gone forth: "O mountains, rejoice! Exult with joy, all mankind! For the eternal Word took flesh and is coming to be baptized in the Jordan by hands that He created, in order to take away the sin of the world!"

Exapostilarion of the Fore-feast

January 5 – Paramony (Eve) of the Holy Theophany

CHRISTMAS EVE AND NEW YEAR'S EVE are holiday milestones in American society. In our tradition January 5, Theophany Eve, is also a special day of preparation and anticipation leading into one of the most important festivals of the Church year.

Like Christmas Eve, Theophany Eve is a ***paramony***, a day of continual prayer and fasting, leading up to the celebration of the feast. Part of what makes this a day of continual prayer is the celebration of the ***Royal Hours*** which replaces the ordinary First, Third, Sixth and Ninth Hours served every day in Byzantine practice. The Divine Liturgy is not served until the end of the fasting day, when it is joined to vespers to begin the feast.

The Royal Hours are served on the Paramony of Christmas, the Paramony of the Theophany and on Great and Holy Friday which we might call the "Paramony of Pascha." In addition, some Greek Churches serve the Royal Hours on the Eve of Pentecost, but without fasting.

Our cycle of daily services has its origin in the experience of the Jews during the Babylonian exile. Since the prescribed round of morning and evening sacrifices could only be conducted in the Jerusalem temple, the exiled Jews developed a cycle of prayers, hymns and Scripture readings to be said throughout the day instead. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the exile, these prayers were incorporated into the usage of the temple. Jews today observe three daily services (morning, afternoon and evening) corresponding to the times of the three daily temple sacrifices.

The first Christians continued the custom of praying at these specific times. The Acts of the Apostles records St Peter going apart to pray at the sixth hour (Acts 10:9) and at the ninth hour (Acts 3:1). With the development of monasticism these daily prayers took on the character of formal services. Other services were added in imitation of the Psalmist's witness, "*Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments*" (Ps 119:164).

The hours came to commemorate important events which the Scriptures say took place at those times. Thus our Third Hour recalls the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (see Acts 2). The Byzantine Sixth and Ninth Hours evoke the memory of Christ's crucifixion and death: "*Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice … and yielded up His spirit*" (Mt 27:45, 50).

What Makes These Hours "Royal"?

While for most of the year the Hours are "cell services" – without choral responses or accompanying ritual, meant to be served by monastics in their cells (or by anyone at work or at home), the Royal Hours are served solemnly in church with hymns, Scripture readings and ceremony. They are generally served without interruption and conclude with the Typika. The name "Royal Hours" comes from the practice of the Great Church in Constantinople. The emperor and his court would attend the Hours on these days, emphasizing their importance in the life of the Church.

Scripture in the Royal Hours

As a rule, the Scriptures read at the Hours are all taken from the Psalms. In the Royal Hours, however, selections from both the Old and New Testaments are read, in addition to the Psalter. The New Testament selections recount the ministry of John and the baptism of Christ as well as the meaning of baptism in the Church. The Old Testament readings, all taken from the Book of Isaiah the Prophet, provide us with an illustration of how Old Testament prophecies are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The Prophet Isaiah lived in the eight century BC and, like other prophets, called on his hearers to repent and to conform their lives to God's way. The following passage, read at the Third Royal Hour, illustrates Isaiah's message: "*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow*" (Is 1:16-17).

Isaiah warned that, if people did not repent, the nation would suffer at the hands of its enemies (at that time, the Assyrians). If they did repent, however, they would be restored and given new life. We see this in the selection read at the Sixth Royal Hour, "*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call upon His Name; make known His deeds among the nations, proclaim that His Name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for He has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel*" (Is 12:3-6).

The second half of the book, added some 200 years later, reflects the same themes. At this point in Israel's history their great enemy was Babylon rather than Assyria. The Babylonians would conquer Jerusalem and destroy the temple, dragging the most prominent Jews into exile.

Streams in the Desert

The promise for their restoration dominates the second half of Isaiah. Jerusalem, no longer desolate, will be rebuilt and will water its thirsty people. At the First Royal Hour we read, "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the lily. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon… Behold, your God will come…. He will come and save you. … For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water*" (Is 35:1-7).

The power of Babylon ended just as that of Assyria had centuries before, but the ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies would only come with Christ. We see in Him the Source of eternal life, the One who truly turns the arid wilderness of thirsty hearts into springs of water. This theme would be taken up in the Gospel of John, where we read the words of the Lord Jesus "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those who believe in Him would receive"* (Jn 7:37-38).

The frequent mention of water in these passages, then, does not just allude to the Lord's baptism in the Jordan but to the Lord Himself. He is the One who can refresh with the living water of the Holy Spirit all who come to Him. He is the One who is revealed at the Jordan by the Father's

voice and the Spirit's hidden presence and who begins to announce the good news of our salvation to the world.

When he saw the Lord of glory draw near to him, the Forerunner cried out: "Behold the One who redeems the world from corruption! Behold the One who delivers us from affliction! Behold the One who, in His mercy, has come forth upon earth from a pure Virgin, granting remission of sins! Instead of servants, He makes us children of God. Instead of darkness, He gives light to mankind through the waters of His divine baptism. Come, let us glorify Him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit."

Idiomelon at the Ninth Royal Hour

January 6 – Feast of the Holy Theophany
Titus 2:11-14, 3:4-7 – Matthew 3:13-17

The Lord Manifested in the Jordan

"THE HOLY DAY OF THE LIGHTS to which we have come, and which we are celebrating today, has for its origin the Baptism of my Christ, the True Light that lightens everyone who comes into the world, and effects my purification…" These words, which begin St Gregory the Theologian's homily "On the Lights," reflect what was already a well-known custom when he spoke them (AD 381). They also point to the reason why this is an especially appropriate term for this feast of the Theophany.

It has been suggested that the feast was introduced in third century Alexandria, where January 6 was observed by the pagans as the birthday of Aeon, the patron god of the city. By the fourth century it was observed in Jerusalem and it was not long before this feast was kept throughout the East.

At first the feast observed the theophanies of God at Christ's birth, at His baptism and at His first miracle at Cana. Eventually the Western date of December 25 was adopted in the East for the remembrance of the Nativity and January 6 for the theophany at His baptism. To this day, however, the Armenian Church celebrates both manifestations on January 6.

Why Lights?

One explanation, mentioned in some synaxaria, is offered by Severian, Bishop of Gavalon. He remarks that in the Church there was great abundance of light on this feast day because the Christians carried lighted candles. The same is mentioned by Ephraim the Syrian in his hymn on the Epiphany (9th verse). The ceremony in Jerusalem, as described by the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria, began with a procession during the night from Bethlehem to the Church of the

Resurrection in Jerusalem. They enter the church before daybreak "where an exceedingly great number of lights are already burning."

The theme of light resounds on this feast because light frequently represents the divine in the Scriptures. The most evocative use of this image for Christians is found in the Gospel of John where the Lord says "*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not w*alk *in darkness, but have the light of life*" (Jn 8:12).

St Gregory in his homily links a number of the Scriptural verses on light. "Therefore listen to the Voice of God, which sounds so exceeding clearly to me, who am both disciple and master of these mysteries, as would to God it may sound to you: 'I am the Light of the world' [Jn 8:12]. Therefore 'approach Him and be enlightened, and let not your faces be ashamed,' [Ps 33:5, LXX] being signed with the true Light.

"This is a season of new birth, let us be born again. It is a time of reformation, let us receive again the first Adam. Let us not remain what we are, but let us become what we once were. 'The Light shined in darkness,' [Jn 1:5] in this life and in the flesh, and is chased by the darkness, but is not overtaken by it (I mean the adverse power leaping up in its shamelessness against the visible Adam, but encountering God and being defeated) in order that we, putting away the darkness, may draw near to the Light, and may then become perfect Light, the children of perfect Light."

Christ is said to enlighten mankind by what He has revealed to us. First of all, He has shown us God in His own person ("*Then Jesus cried out and said, 'He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness*" – Jn 12:44-46). In Christ we see God as compassionate, long-suffering of our weaknesses and willing to take on our sufferings Himself to restore our likeness to Him.

Christ also enlightens us by showing us – again in His own person – what a human being is. What He taught in words, He also taught by His way of life: "*Love one another as I have loved you… the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many… I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life… If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you*." He shows us that the way to glory is to empty oneself and take up the cross of the sufferings of others just as He did.

Theophany

The event commemorated on this day, Christ's baptism in the Jordan, is considered a *theophany* or manifestation of God for two reasons. First of all, it marked the beginning of the Lord's public life. He would go from the Jordan to the wilderness and be tempted, then return to begin His public ministry.

Hardly noticed by those present, Christ's baptism has been the occasion for reflection by Christians throughout the ages. Thus St Hippolytus' Discourse on the Holy Theophany (third century) exults: "Oh things strange beyond compare! How should the boundless River that

makes glad the city of God have been dipped in a little water! The illimitable Spring that bears life to all, and has no end, was covered by poor and temporary waters! He who is present everywhere, and absent nowhere, who is incomprehensible to angels and invisible to men, comes to baptism according to His own good pleasure."

In the thought of the Greek Fathers this event was the occasion of an even more momentous theophany: the New Testament's first revelation of the Holy Trinity. All three Persons were made manifest together: the Father testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus; the Son received His Father's testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son. This is the theophany recalled in the troparion of the feast: "At Your baptism in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was revealed; …"

Baptism

In the earliest days of the Church baptism was offered to anyone anytime, once they believed. With the development of the Church year by the third century, it became customary to connect baptism with the feast of the resurrection (which baptism reenacts) and, later, with Pentecost, the "outpouring of the Spirit upon all flesh." When the feast of the Theophany was definitively connected with the remembrance of Christ's baptism it too became a baptismal feast.

Stichera at Vespers

When the Forerunner saw Him who is our Enlightenment, who enlightens every man, coming to be baptized, his heart rejoiced and his hand trembled. He pointed Him out to the people and said: "This is the Savior of Israel, who delivered us from corruption!" O Christ God, O sinless One, glory to You!

When You bowed Your head to the Forerunner, You crushed the heads of the dragons; and when You stood in the midst of the stream, You let Your light shine upon all creatures, that they might glorify You, our Savior, who enlighten our souls!

The Great Blessing of Water

THE GREAT FEASTS OF THE EASTERN CHURCHES are all observed with special hymns, special icons, and often, special rites. We may think immediately of the blessing of palms on Palm Sunday, the blessing of foods on Pascha, the exaltation of the Holy Cross on that feast or the blessing of grapes on the feast of the Transfiguration. The most solemn of these festal blessings, however, is the Great Sanctification of Water on the Feast of the Theophany.

Church orders actually prescribe two such blessings on the Theophany. At the end of the Vesper-Liturgy on the eve of the feast a vessel of water is sanctified in the church and the water given to the faithful to drink and to take to their homes. After the Liturgy on the feast itself the same rite is performed over a nearby body of water (ocean, river, lake or stream). Parishes that do not observe the full order may only have one such blessing.

Blessed Water in East and West

Holy Water is commonly used in all Eastern and Western Churches but with some difference in their meanings and purposes. In the West holy water is chiefly for purification. It is placed at the doors of churches for worshippers to bless themselves with it on entering the church as a kind of purification. At the principal Sunday Mass the entire congregation is so purified as the priest goes through the church sprinkling the worshippers. These practices recall the Old Testament tradition of having pools or basins of water at the entry to the temple for the same purpose. In the Eastern Churches purification is more commonly associated with incense.

In the Eastern Churches the sanctification of water has a different connotation. It is first of all connected with transformation. At baptism water is transformed that it may be a vehicle for the transformation of the person baptized in it into communion with the Holy Trinity. By being buried in the water and then raised out of it, the new Christian experiences his or her own Pascha by being connected to the death and resurrection of Christ, thus becoming a partaker in the divine nature.

While at baptism a person is sanctified by being placed in the water, the reverse happens at the Theophany. It is the water which is sanctified by the One who entered into it. At the Great Sanctification of Water on the Theophany a cross, representing Christ, is immersed in the water three times, liturgically re-enacting the baptism of Christ and sanctifying the water. This sanctification of water at the Theophany represents the transformation of creation, begun with the incarnation and intended to touch all creation. As St. Paul writes, "*the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now*" (Rom 8:21-22).

The rite continues, representing the extension of the blessing of the Jordan to all creation. The priest goes through the church sprinkling everyone and everything with the newly-sanctified water. In Eastern countries this procession may go through the entire neighborhood or village as the people sing the troparion of the Theophany. People would open their doors and the priest would go into their homes, passing from one to another with the blessing of the Jordan. This rite witnesses to the ongoing transfiguration of creation begun at the Jordan. In contemporary society this aspect of the rite has morphed into a scheduled appearance of the priest to bless the home, visit with the family, collect donations, discuss the parish, etc. Something has been lost.

Is Blessed Water Really Holy?

The twentieth century Russian Orthodox saint, John Maximovich, taught: "On Theophany, the Day of the Lord's Baptism, every year a great miracle is performed. The Holy Spirit, coming down upon the water, changes its natural properties. It becomes incorrupt, not spoiling, remaining transparent and fresh for many years. This Holy Water receives the grace to heal

illnesses, to drive away demons and every evil power, to preserve people and their dwellings from every danger, to sanctify various objects whether for church or home use. Therefore, Orthodox Christians with reverence drink Holy Water … People who drink a little Holy Water daily, before eating any kind of food, do well. It strengthens the powers of our soul—if it is done with prayer and reverence, and one does not merely expect a mechanical result from it."

The prayer for the sanctification of water certainly supports the idea that a "great miracle" is expected when we sanctify the water. The priest chants:

> "… Great are You, O Lord, and wonderful your works, and no word is adequate to sing the praise of your wonders (*3 times*). "…Therefore, O King, Lover of mankind, be present now too through the visitation of your Holy Spirit, and sanctify this water. (*3 times*) And give to it the grace of redemption and the blessing of Jordan. Make it a source of incorruption, a gift of sanctification, a deliverance from sins, an averting of diseases, unapproachable by hostile powers, filled with angelic strength. That all who draw from it and partake of it may have it for cleansing of souls and bodies, for healing of passions, for sanctification of homes, for every suitable purpose. … And now, Master, do You yourself sanctify this water by your Holy Spirit" (*3 times*).

This prayer is an epiclesis – a plea for the sending of the Holy Spirit – asking that God effect a transformation. In this it is similar to the prayer said by the bishop when he sanctifies the Holy Chrism and to the Eucharistic epiclesis in the Divine Liturgy itself.

The current order for the Great Sanctification of Water is attributed to St. Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem (634-638) but the above prayer is much older. In the fourth century St Basil the Great speaks of this rite as a "mystical tradition" (On *the Holy Spirit,* 27: 66) which shows that it was practiced even before his time. It is also mentioned in the fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*, a Syrian work, and in the treatise *On the Holy Spirit* by St. Ambrose of Milan (died 397). All these sources attribute the sanctification of water to the Holy Spirit.

Partaking at Home

Many people drink a little blessed water and eat a piece of antidoron (blessed bread) as part of their regular Morning Prayers, before eating or drinking anything else. In this way they express their union with the worshipping Church and with the Lord who is transforming us and all creation as well.

This Prayer is often said before partaking:

O Lord my God, may this partaking of antidoron and holy water be for the health and strength of my soul and body, for the control of my passions and infirmities and for the enlightening of my physical and spiritual faculties in Your boundless loving-kindness, through the prayers of Your most pure Mother and of all the saints. Amen.

God Revealed at the Jordan – Icon of the Theophany

WHAT DO WE CELEBRATE on January 6? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Just look at the icon: it's Jesus' baptism!

Actually, neither the icon nor the feast celebrates *the fact that* the Lord Jesus was baptized. Rather we remember *what happened at His baptism* and what it represents for us as we live our life in Christ. We do not call this the Feast of Christ's Baptism, focusing on the historical setting. Rather we call it the Feast of the Holy Theophany, or "manifestation of God,"

Manifestation of the Trinity

The troparion of the feast sets the tone for our reflection: "At Your baptism in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was revealed; for the Father's voice bore witness to You, calling You His beloved Son and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the truth of His word. O Christ God, who have appeared to us and enlightened the world, glory to You!"

The story of this theophany is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John's Gospel, as we shall see, the Baptist alludes to it as he describes the character and mission of Jesus.

The Father's Voice: Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell of a voice from heaven heard at Jesus' baptism calling Him "*My beloved Son*" (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22). None of the Evangelists say outright that this was the voice of God, but since their picture of Jesus as the Son of God is clear in the Gospels, we can draw no other conclusion.

In icons of the Theophany this voice is depicted symbolically by the ray of light which originates in a geometric shape – often a semicircle – and rests over the head of Jesus.

The Dove: All the Evangelists, including John, describe the presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. In John's Gospel the Baptist offers his own testimony: "He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit;' and I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God" (Jn 1:33, 34).

In icons the dove is enclosed in an aureole, symbol of divine glory, in the midst of the ray representing the Father's voice.

St John of Damascus compared the dove which appeared at the end of the flood to the dove at Jesus' baptism. "As, at that time the world was cleansed of sin through the waters of the flood, then the dove brought an olive branch to Noah's Ark announcing the end of the flood, and peace came to the Earth, so, in like manner the Holy Spirit descends as a dove to announce forgiveness of sins and God's mercy on the world. Then [it was] an olive branch, now it is our Lord's mercy."

The graphic presence of the Father (by His voice), the Son (in the flesh) and the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove) is the first such manifestation of the Holy Trinity in the New Testament. The second such revelation is at the Holy Transfiguration of Christ as His ministry is drawing to a close.

The Lord Jesus: God and Man

Christ is clearly Lord in icons of this feast. Several signs of His divinity and preeminence are found in the way He is shown. In Western depictions of His baptism Jesus is often shown with His head bowed and hands folded in prayer. That is never the case in our icons. He is shown standing erect, often with His hand raised in blessing.

In some older icons Christ is depicted naked. We are back in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve, created in communion with God, are naked and unashamed. The original creation is restored and renewed with the coming of Christ.

> *"Once You clothed the shameful nakedness of our forefather Adam; now You are stripped naked of Your own will! You covered the roof of heaven with waters; now You wrap Yourself in the streams of Jordan, only merciful Christ."*

In later icons Christ is depicted with a drape around His waist, which represents the winding sheet in which He was wrapped for burial. The river is often depicted in the shape of a cave, suggesting the tomb in which He was laid.

In some icons the water envelops His sacred body which is visible in it. We are thus reminded of the death and resurrection of Christ into which our baptism immerses us.

In other icons Jesus is not submerged into the water at all. He is depicted astride the river as He blesses it. The River Jordan did not cleanse Christ; it is Christ's presence in its midst which sanctifies the waters.

Other Signs of God's Presence

The icon of the Theophany, as well as many of its hymns, includes other elements which point to the divine activity present in Christ at His baptism. Among them are:

John the Forerunner: The presence of John the Baptist is an essential part of the story of Jesus' baptism. In icons, however, the depiction of John is more about Christ than it is about him. In some icons John is showed bowing to the Lord, bent in awe before the One he had come to announce. In other icons John is depicted as gazing up toward heaven, as if beholding the manifestation of the Father and the Spirit. In either case, although he was the focus of all other baptisms which he performed, John was not the center of this one.

The Axe: In some icons we see a tree stump with an axe embedded in it near where John is standing. This recalls John's prophetic words to the Pharisees, "even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 3:10). The axe ready to cut signifies that the Messiah is at hand.

The Seascape: In some icons Christ is shown standing on one or two rocks, sometimes arranged in the form of a cross. Here we are reminded of the resurrection icon in which the Lord is depicted astride the gates of Death. In that icon the personification of Death often lies bound beneath His feet. In the Theophany icon it is often snakes or a sea creature under His feet. In both cases what is depicted is Christ's victory over the powers of darkness. "*You crushed the heads of the dragons in the water*" (Ps 73:14).

> *"When You bowed Your head to the Forerunner, You crushed the heads of the dragons; and when You stood in the midst of the stream, You let Your light shine upon all creatures, that they might glorify You, Our Savior, who enlighten our souls!"*

The Sea: At the bottom of the icon we often find two small figures with astonished looks on their faces, often astride dolphins. They personify these psalm verses, alluding to the Exodus but often heard during the feast of the Theophany: "The sea saw and fled; Jordan turned back… What ails you, O sea, that you fled? O Jordan, that you turned back? O mountains, that you skipped like rams? O little hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob" (Ps 114:3, 5-7).

> *Today the prophecy of the Psalms swiftly approaches its fulfillment: "The sea looked and fled: Jordan was driven back" before the face of the Lord, before the face of the God of Jacob! He came to receive baptism from His servant, so that our souls washed clean from the defilement of idolatry, might be enlightened through Him!*

Sunday after the Theophany
Ephesians 4:7-13 – Matthew 4:12-17

"Equipping the Saints" (Eph 4:7-13)

MANY PEOPLE ONLY SEE THEIR PASTOR during liturgical services. They may have no contact with any of the clergy outside of this context. The only other "church functions" they attend may be social or athletic events where the clergy are on the sidelines. The pastor's most prominent role in our Church today is as liturgist.

As a result, particularly in rural or village churches of the Christian East, a man's voice was his chief qualification for entrance into the clergy. And if he had a nice full beard like Jesus, so much the better! Priests would often preempt deacons and deacons the other clergy if their rendition of the Gospel or a favorite hymn was more lyrical. The best clergyman was a good liturgist and the best liturgist, after all, was the best virtuoso.

When parishes were established in this country they were often organized after the model employed by the Roman Catholic churches around them. There the laity had no role in the parish beyond taking up the collection and possibly arranging flowers for the altar. Any ministry in the parish was exercised by the clergy and religious such as teaching sisters.

If we look to see how things were done in the New Testament era, a very different picture emerges. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, for example, we find a very clear cut job description. St Paul writes, "*To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift…He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*" (Eph 4: 7, 11-13).

Those with Gifts of Leadership

St Paul lists several types of Church leaders. The ***Apostles*** were first of all those who had been eyewitnesses to Christ life and ministry. When a replacement for Judas was to be chosen Peter identified the eligible candidates as being one "*of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us*" (Acts 1:21-22). He then went on to indicate his own understanding of an Apostle's role in the Church: "*one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection*."

Many people think that ***Prophets*** are fortune tellers, telling how the future is to play itself out. Sometimes that is close to the truth. At other times the prophet's gift is to speak God's will for the present moment or, rather, to interpret the present moment in the light of God's will for us. This function in the Church is generally found in the monastic calling. By their vows they become "dead to the world" in a foretaste of the common destiny of all of us. In the Kingdom of God neither possessions nor physical relationships will continue. There will be no ego, no pride, for all the glory will be God's. In addition some monastics have the gift of discernment, reading the hearts of those who come to them for guidance.

Evangelists are those who proclaim the Gospel far and wide. Missionaries and retreat masters have often shared in this gift. Today web masters and bloggers might join in this gift. The ***pastor/ teacher***, on the other hand, is the person at the head of the local Church, the bishop or his representative, the presbyter (priest). While the others mentioned traveled around the Mediterranean world bringing the good news of Christ, the pastors were the people left behind to shepherd the local community. Their main role was described as "*equipping of the saints for the work of ministry,"* the "saints" being those who were made holy by being united to Christ in holy baptism. At every baptism we are reminded that "All of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." You can't get much holier than that!

The pastor in this view is primarily an enabler, giving people the tools needed to take up their place in one of the Church's ministries. He must see to the training of greeters, singers and servers, of catechists and ministers to the sick, of church council members and workers in any other kind of ministry that might be needed in the parish. And it is *because* he is this enabler of

the saints under his care, *because* he is the teacher and shepherd of the flock that the pastor presides at liturgical services.

The Work of Ministry

In St Paul's vision of the Church, there are no passive spectators. All are meant to be active, to be engaged in the work of ministry in one way or another. Most parishes have their regular schedule of projects that mark its life during the year – coffee hours, fundraisers, socials, outings – and people work to make them happen. This is certainly one level of ministry, but there is more. Two such ministries which touch the heart of every parish are those concerned with worship and catechesis.

Liturgical singing is a ministry in which all worshippers should be involved. Everyone should take part in the chants appointed for the people. Others have a more particular or specialized ministry as cantors or choir members. A cantor can make or break the liturgical services in the parish because the cantor is the liturgical minister most concerned with the involvement of the people.

People have long associated ministering in the holy place with "altar boys." In fact, the role the servers play is basically the role of subdeacons. In many places the servers are actually vested as subdeacons. At least a few older teens or young adults should be involved in this ministry to supervise and train any younger servers the parish might employ. In some Eastern Churches those senior servers who have a firm commitment to this ministry are actually blessed by the bishop as subdeacons.

Another essential ministry in every parish in that of catechist. Many people identify the term catechist with Sunday School teacher, but those who coordinate youth ministry, work with young adults or conduct adult education programs are also catechists. In some churches people have been trained to introduce visitors to the church or help them follow the Liturgy. In other places people have been instructed to conduct church open houses, perhaps in conjunction with a food festival. All of these are catechetical ministries essential for the spiritual growth of the parish.

Taking part in any of these activities demands a level of commitment. Cantors must plan their leisure activities around the parish's schedule of liturgical services. Catechists must commit themselves to a full cycle of sessions in any given year. These demands would be a real burden to anyone who was not convinced that ministering in this way was their return to God of the gift He had given them.

Training Is a Must!

One aspect of any serious ministry is the need for training. The twentieth-century academic Margaret Mead once said in another context, "*Zeal without knowledge is a sin*." This certainly applies to ministry in the Church. The desire to serve must be complemented by a willingness to

be trained for service. Being smarter than a child, for example, does not automatically make someone a good catechist! Neither does having "learned one's catechism" (in another age or even in another Church tradition) dispense a volunteer catechist from going through a training program.

While our "volunteer army," however, has a rigorous boot camp, people often have assumed tasks in the Church or been given them by their pastors without any adequate preparation. Because adults know more than children, for example, it is sometimes assumed that any adult can be a catechist. Because a person is "nice" to their friends or relatives, it may be taken for granted that he or she would make a good doorkeeper or greeter. In some communities the resulting distorted practices have become "traditional."

While some clergy have encouraged people to assume responsibilities without preparation, others still refuse to let laypeople assume any significant duties in the church. It is easier, they say, to do things themselves since they will have to do everything over anyway. Neither of these approaches will lead a parish to the Scriptural model of a mature congregation. In spiritually strong Churches, preparation for ministry is essential. It is not enough to say "come and do."

To "equip" for the work of ministry, to use St Paul's phrase, means more than giving praise and encouragement, or even providing the basic materials required for the service in question. To equip the saints for the work of ministry means to form them in the spirituality of the Church and the place of their ministry in its life.

Repentance and Ministry

The first aspect in any formation of the saints is the same first step Christ used in the formation of His apostles: "*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel*" (Mk 1:15).

Many people have a loyalty to their parish based on their family or ethnic connection or on their own investment of time and energy over the years. Their connection to their parish may be stronger than their connection to the Church or to Christ. For a mature service, oriented to developing the unity of faith, more is required.

Anyone ministering in the Church – anyone serious about their faith – must be a person committed to spending the rest of their life in peace and repentance, as our liturgical prayers indicate. In English and other European languages repentance suggests looking backwards: doing penance for the wrongs you have done. Not so in Greek, the language of the New Testament. There *to repent* means to change the focus of your life, to look ahead with a new vision. St. Paul, for example, urges, *"…do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our lord Jesus Christ…"* (Eph 5:18-20). Do not simply regret your old behavior: replace it with new behavior in Christ.

Repentance, "the discarding of the old, earthly man, and on the other hand, the 'putting on of the new man who is restored by the energy of the Most Holy Spirit" is nothing other than the life of baptism renewed each day. Each time we receive the Eucharist we in effect revive our baptismal commitment. A life spent in peace and repentance renews that commitment every day.

Ministry in the Church is not simply another task in our life. People in the Church looking for spiritual leadership should expect that those in ministry are serving out of a deeper than ordinary faith. Sometimes this does not seem to be so. Church service is too often marred by the presence of the "old, earthly man" in us. The result is frequently a clash of personalities or a partisan spirit leading to cliques or even splits in the community. Instead of leading to unity in faith, Church service becomes fertile ground for the Enemy. Only when Church servants are striving to put on the "new man" every day can such conflicts be avoided.

Service in the Church, then, is for all believers, for all have received gifts which have been given to build up the Body of Christ. And the bedrock of any service in the Church for all believers is repentance, adopting the outlook on life of a "new man," a person united to God in Christ.

The roof of any house stands upon the foundations and the rest of the structure. The foundations themselves are laid in order to carry the roof. This is both useful and necessary, for the roof cannot stand without the foundations and the foundations are absolutely useless without the roof — no help to any living creature. — *St. Symeon the New Theologian*

"He Who Descended" (Eph 4:9, 10)

THE LORD JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY begins, as it were, where John the Forerunner left off. He travels through Galilee, the Gospels assert, preaching like John, "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Mt 4:17). "*News of Him went out throughout the surrounding region and He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all* (Lk 4:14-15).

Finally, Luke adds, Jesus came to Nazareth "*where He had been brought up*" (Lk 4:16) and people were amazed at Him – they knew Him simply as Joseph's son. Over and over in the Gospels we see people wondering just who Jesus is, the disciples growing in faith and emboldened to proclaim, as Peter did on Pentecost, "*that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified*" (Acts 2:36).

The Apostles' faith continued to develop as they began preaching the risen Christ. By the time St Paul wrote his so-called prison epistles (Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians) some thirty years later, the apostolic Church had come to recognize that Moses and the Prophets had intimated

something deeper about the Messiah. Their deepening faith in Jesus' eternal existence as the Word of God is expressed repeatedly in these epistles.

In the Epistle to the Colossians St Paul makes a straightforward confession of the unity of Christ with the Father. "*He is the image* [ikon] *of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation; for by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the Church who is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead that in all things He may be preeminent, for it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross*" (Col 1:15-20).

And so, Paul taught, Jesus who was crucified and risen was also the pre-eternal icon of the Father through whom all things were created. In the Epistle to the Ephesians he describes the mystery of Christ in puzzling terms of a downward motion (descent) and an upward motion (ascent). Commenting on a verse from Psalm 68, St Paul writes, "*Now this 'He ascended' – what does it mean, but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all thing*s" (Eph 4:9-10).

Kenosis: Christ Empties Himself

This movement of descent and ascent is perhaps most clearly explained in the Epistle to the Philippians as a voluntary self-emptying of Himself and thus as a model for our lives. "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God has also highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow – of those in heaven and of those on earth – and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father*" (Col 2:5-11).

From the Greek word translated here as "emptied Himself" we have the word ***kenosis*** to describe the Son of God's voluntary descent to assume our nature. He put aside the glory of His divinity to take up our humanity, only allowing it to be seen by Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration. Christ is described as the opposite of many of us who refuse to let our status symbols free from our grasp. He puts aside the glory of being the Father's icon to become Son of Man. The One who is enthroned upon the cherubim now has nowhere to lay His head.

Glorification: Jesus is Lord

While kenosis expressed the downward movement of the Word's voluntary setting aside of His glory, the upward movement of His glorification is connected with the term ***kyrios*** (Lord). This is the term we regularly associate with Christ but we do not realize how revolutionary that association was at first. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, *Kyrios* was the word spoken in place of the un-pronouncable name of God, "Yahweh," the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush (see Ex 3:15), a term we roughly translate as "The One Who Is" or "The Existing One." Similarly observant Jews today refuse to speak this name, referring to God simply as *Hashem* ("the name").

The most basic "creed" in the apostolic Church was connected with this term. St Paul incorporates it into his Epistle to the Romans: "*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord* [Kyrios] *and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Rom 10:9).

And so the apostolic Church, which had first met Jesus in the villages of Galilee, came to know Him as the pre-eternal Son of the Father who descended to become one of us and ascended once more as Lord, bearing humanity with Him to where He was before.

In our Liturgy the emphasis is principally on Jesus as *Kyrios*, the eternal Word. At the end of Orthros or Vespers the priest turns to the icon of Christ and proclaims, "Blessed is He-Who-Is, Christ our true God, at all times…" The icon to which he points – and all icons of Christ – is inscribed with the same Greek word, Ὁ ΩN (the One-Who-Is): Jesus of Nazareth, the One-Who-Is, now in glory as God and Man.

Kenosis in the Liturgy

Our liturgical poetry frequently alludes to the contrast between Christ's divine state and His incarnation.

Today, He who holds the whole creation in the hollow of His hand is born of the Virgin! He whose Essence none can approach will be wrapped in swaddling clothes as a mortal. God, who established the heavens at the beginning of time will lie in a manger. He who rained down manna on His people in the desert will be nourished by milk from His Mother's breast! The Bridegroom of the Church, who called the Magi, will accept their gifts as the Son of the Virgin. We bow down and worship Your Nativity, O Christ! Show us also Your Theophany! *Ninth Royal Hour*

Beholding him who was in God's image and likeness fallen through the transgression, Jesus bowed the heavens and came down. And without change, He took up His dwelling in a Virgin's womb: that He might fashion corrupt Adam anew, who cried out to Him: "Glory to Your Theophany, O my Redeemer and my God!" *Liti of the Nativity*

For our sakes, Christ has come forth from the seed of Abraham, to raise up to the dignity of sons those who had fallen into the darkness of sin, which bowed them down to the earth. Despite His great dignity, He who dwells in endless Light has willed to dwell in a manger for the salvation of mankind. *Canon of the Nativity*

"N" Is for Nazarene (Mt 4:12-17)

WHEN THE "ISLAMIC STATE" FIGHTERS seized Mosul in northern Iraq they marked Christian properties for seizure by painting the Arabic letter ن ("N") for "Nasrani" on the buildings. Muslims do not use the Arabic word for "Christian" (*Maseehi – followers of the Messiah*) but refer to Jesus' disciples as *Nasrani*, followers of the Nazarene. They assume it is an insult. In response, many Western Christians, like the Archbishop of Canterbury, began displaying the ن in solidarity with their beleaguered Eastern brethren.

Nasrani is, in fact an ancient designation in the Aramaic-speaking world. To this day the Syriac Christians of India, whether Catholic, Church of the East or Orthodox, refer to themselves as *Mar Thoma Nasrani* (St Thomas Christians). To be a Nazarene was – and remains – an honorable way for Syriac Christians to call themselves followers of Jesus.

Nazareth in the Scriptures

The Gospels refer to Nazareth as a city ("*polis*"); by our standards it was probably a small village. For the 600 years after the Assyrian conquest of Israel in 722 BC much of Galilee had all been abandoned by the Jews. Until the second century BC few Jews lived in the province; then, according to the evidence of archaeology, there was a sudden change. Within a few decades, dozens of new villages appeared as Jews returned to the area.

In the first century AD Nazareth was a place of no importance, probably inhabited only by local farmers and tradesmen. Apart from the Gospels there is no mention of it in early documents before the third century. Unlike many of the more populous towns in Galilee, Nazareth had an exclusively Jewish population. There were no Gentiles or even Samaritans living there, a good indication that the village held little economic or political interest. Its residents seem to have been regarded as "Jewish hillbillies" by their neighbors. Thus, when Philip told Nathaniel, from the nearby town of Cana, about Jesus, "*Nathaniel said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*'" (Jn 1:46). Its residents were devout, however, and had a synagogue where Jesus was accustomed to pray.

Nazareth: Icon of the Divine Humility

As the early Church came to emphasize the divinity of Christ, its appreciation of the depth of God's love for us grew. The Church spoke of the incarnation as an act of *Kenosis*, or self-emptying. In the words of St Paul, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who,*

being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:5-7).

That the incarnation took place in Nazareth, an insignificant Galilean village, points to the depth of the self-emptying which the Word of God assumed for us. Nazarenes, including the Theotokos herself, were people of no account by the world's standards. They had nothing of value to either the rulers of Israel or its priests. They were basically "invisible" to the important ones of their day. Nazareth wasn't "on the map," as it were. Yet it is here that a young woman was chosen to usher in the new covenant kingdom. As St Paul would later point out, "*But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are*" (1 Cor 1:27-28).

Capernaum "By the Sea"

The Gospels tell us that Nazareth was "*where [Jesus] had been brought up*" (Lk 4:16) but that He began His public ministry in the nearby towns of Cana and Capernaum. When He returned to Nazareth, the Lord encountered opposition to His teaching (see Lk 4:16-31); and so, as we read in Mt 4:13, He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum.

On the main highway to Damascus, Capernaum "*by the sea*" (Mt 4:13) was an important crossroads for traders and other travelers to Asia Minor, Syria and present-day Lebanon. As such it had a customs office and a detachment of Roman soldiers was quartered there. Its location on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee (known to the Romans as Lake Tiberias and today as Lake Kinneret) was a rich fishing ground. It was among these fishermen that Jesus called His first disciples, Andrew and Peter, James and John.

Capernaum became Jesus' home after He left Nazareth. There He attracted disciples from Capernaum, including Matthew the tax collector, as well as from the nearby villages of Cana (Nathaniel) and Bethsaida where Philip lived.

Christian Nazareth

Nazareth remained a Jewish town for centuries. Its first church seems to have been built by a wealthy convert, Joseph of Tiberias, at the time of St. Constantine. The church, dedicated to the Annunciation, was rebuilt during the Crusades and again in the eighteenth century. It is located over an underground spring, where the Virgin Mary was reputedly drawing water at the time of the Annunciation. Water from the spring still runs inside the apse of the church and also feeds the adjacent site of "Mary's Well," located 150 yards away.

The local Jews seem to have appreciated the importance of Nazareth for Christians. In AD 570 a pilgrim from Piacenza in Italy (sometimes identified as Antoninus) wrote of his visit to the town: "The synagogue still has the book which was used to teach Our Lord the alphabet. There is also a bench in the synagogue where Our Lord would sit with the other children."

Jews were expelled from Nazareth in the early seventh century during the war with the Persians. When the Frankish bishop Arculf visited Nazareth in 670, the synagogue had been turned into a church.

The present "synagogue church" in Nazareth is of medieval origin, possibly built in the twelfth century by the Crusaders, and is now sunken about five feet underground. This church was under the control of the Franciscans until the 18th century, when the emir Daher al-Omar passed it to the Greek Catholics.

Nazareth remained a predominantly Christian town throughout the modern era until the resettlements after World War I. Today it is the largest Arab city in Israel noted for its software development and munitions industries.

Finds in Capernaum

The nineteenth century saw excavations conducted in parts of Capernaum resulting in the discovery of the ruins of an ancient synagogue, and a fifth-century octagonal church. During the twentieth century further excavations unearthed portions of a first-century house that had been venerated as the house of St Peter as early as the mid-first century. First turned into a church probably in the fourth century, it has come to be known as "St. Peter's House."

Another modern find is a fishing boat, built sometime in the first century BC, which was discovered in 1986 during an unusually low water level in Lake Kinneret. The boat had been preserved in the mud of the lake-bed, and was found to contain various items, including an oil lamp and a cooking pot. Dubbed the "Jesus boat," the craft is now on display at a nearby kibbutz.

The Scriptures Fulfilled

WHAT LANGUAGE WAS SPOKEN by the first Christians? On one level, we can say it was Aramaic or Hebrew with a sprinkling of Greek. On another level – the level of spiritual thought – we must say that the first Christians spoke the language of the Torah, what Christians today call the Old Testament.

The first Christians' cultural and spiritual frame of reference was the Jewish Scriptures, the same tradition revered by all Jews of their day. The difference between them was that the first Christians believed that the promises of the Torah and the Prophets were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures Are Fulfilled

From the first, Jesus affirmed that He was realizing what had been foretold. "*So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read*." After reading Is 61:1, 2 He announced, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*" (Lk 4: 18, 19, 21). When His fellow-townsmen rejected Him, He moved on to Capernaum.

In Matthew's Gospel the story of Jesus' ministry begins with another prophecy: "…*and leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and*

Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Mt 4:12-17).

The New Testament Quotes the Old

There are a number of times in the Gospels when specific Old Testament texts are quoted in the belief that they are fulfilled in Christ. Some of these claims are interwoven into the stories of Christ's teaching and miracles. Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount the Lord announces: "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*" (Mt 5:17, 18).

In Luke's Gospel, the Lord speaks more directly: to say that He fulfills the Law means that the era of the Law was at an end. "*The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail*" (Lk 16:16, 17).

Several times in the course of His preaching, the Lord Jesus tried to show His disciples that He was the realization of these prophecies. He explained His use of parables in terms of an Old Testament prophecy: "*Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull' ... that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: 'I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world'"* (Mt 13:13-15, 35).

In a similar way the Lord confronted the Pharisees citing the Prophet Isaiah: "*Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ... Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*'" (Mt 15:3, 7-9).

The Passion Prophesied and Fulfilled

As Jesus' time with His disciples was drawing to a close, He tried to prepare them to see His coming Passion as fulfilling the words of the prophets. "*Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.' But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken*" (Lk 18:31-34).

Later, of course, the Twelve would see that Christ's death and resurrection fulfilled the prophets' teaching and would proclaim it as such. They taught, for example, that His triumphal entry as king into Jerusalem was such a fulfillment: "*All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: 'Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey – a colt, the foal of a donkey*'" (Mt 21:4, 5).

Prophecies Made Clear by the Risen Lord

It was only after Christ's resurrection that the disciples came to understand how the Old Testament's Messianic prophecies were pointing to the Lord Jesus. When the risen Christ appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus He explained these prophecies to them. As the Gospel recounts it, "*He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (Lk 24:25-27).

After Jesus vanished from their sight, their response was swift as they began to absorb the meaning of this experience: "*And they said to one another, 'Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us*?'" (Lk 24:32). From then on, the early Christians would open the Scriptures by showing how the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms could only be understood as revealing Jesus of Nazareth and His saving work.

From St Cyril of Alexandria

"The Israelites used to say that the Messianic prophecies were fulfilled, either in the persons of some of their more glorious kings or at least in the holy prophets. They did not correctly understand what was written about Him, so they missed the true direction and traveled down another path... For their good [Jesus] draws them away from such a supposition…

"He brings forth Moses and the prophets, interpreting their hidden meaning and making plain to the worthy what was obscure to the unworthy. In this way, He settles in them the ancient and hereditary faith taught them by the sacred books which they posessed. For nothing which comes from God is without its use. All have their appointed place and service."

(St Cyril of Alexandria, *On Luke*, 12, 24)

"The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand"

THE LORD JESUS BEGAN His public ministry with the same message that St John the

Baptist had proclaimed before Him, namely that the "Kingdom of God" or the "Kingdom of heaven" was at hand. What did their hearers understand by this announcement and what should we take it to mean today?

God's Kingdom in the Old Testament

Biblical reflection on the world saw it as the creation of God. Therefore He was its king from the beginning. We find this in a number of places in Scripture, such as Psalm 93 (LXX 92):
"*The Lord is king, in splendor robed;*
Robed is the Lord and girt about with might,
For He has made the world firm
And it shall not be moved.
Your throne has been established of old;
You are from everlasting" (vv. 1-3).

Here the Kingdom of God is **all creation**. We sing verses from this psalm as the prokimenon of vespers on Saturday evening.

Old Testament prophets also saw **Israel** as God's Kingdom. After the Babylonian exile the people of Israel were generally ruled by others – Syrians, Greeks or Romans – with brief interludes of independence. God's people increasingly looked for God to intervene in human history by reestablishing their kingdom. According to the Book of Daniel, God's instrument for restoring this kingdom would be the "*Son of Man*" (Dn 7) or "*Messiah*" (Dn 9). What was called the "Messianic Age" would usher in the Kingdom of God.

Jewish thought generally accepted the thought of the Prophet Isaiah that the great sign of God's Kingdom would be a time of universal peace and brotherhood on the earth, without crime, war and poverty when "*the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea*" (Isaiah 11:9). The coming messiah would inaugurate this Kingdom by defeating the powers warring against God's people.

The rabbis therefore rejected claims that Jesus was the messiah, since greed and enmity still exist in our world. He had "failed," and died as a result. As the twelfth century Jewish thinker Maimonides wrote, failure or death is proof that a defeated leader is not the messiah: "If he does not succeed, or is killed in war, it is certain that he is not the messiah promised in the Torah" (*Mishnah Torah*, Hilchot Malakim 12).

The Lord Jesus and the Kingdom

The Lord Jesus clearly claimed to usher in the Kingdom of God. At the same time He resisted being declared king by the Jews: "*When Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone*" (Jn 6:15). His Kingdom, as He would tell Pilate, was "*not of this world*" (Jn 18:36).

The New Testament presents a vision that **Jesus Himself is the presence of the Kingdom**, what the third-century theologian Origen termed the *autovasileia* (the Kingdom in Himself). In Him there is perfect communion with the Father and an outpouring of God's love. The Gospels show

Him as constant in prayer and in doing the Father's will. He manifests God's love for mankind in a way that no other has done. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "Jesus himself is the Kingdom; the Kingdom is not a thing, it is not a geographical dominion like worldly kingdoms. It is a person; it is he…. By the way in which he speaks of the Kingdom of God, Jesus leads men to realize the overwhelming fact that in him God himself is present among them, that he is God's presence" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, Part 1, p. 49).

The Kingdom Is Within You

While the Lord Jesus is the Kingdom of God in our midst, He tells us that this Kingdom may also be present in human hearts. When people are taken by the love of God and keeping His Commandments, the Kingdom of God is formed within them. When love is present, the God who is love is manifest as love within us.

Citing the Scriptures, Origen connects them with the Lord's injunction to pray "Thy Kingdom come": "'T*he Kingdom of God,'* in the words of our Lord and Savior, *'does not come for all to see; nor shall they say: Behold, here it is, or behold, there it is; but the Kingdom of God is within you,' [Lk 17: 20, 21] 'for the word of God is very near, in our mouth and in our heart'* [Deut 30:14].
Thus it is clear that he who prays for the coming of God's Kingdom prays rightly to have it within himself, that there it might grow and bear fruit and become perfect'" (*On Prayer, 25).*
Enduring for the Kingdom

Many Christians today feel that, because God loves His entire creation, this means that everyone will enter the Kingdom of heaven automatically. They find it difficult to harmonize God's love for us with the need to respond actively to that love. While rejoicing in God's love for us, we need to remember these sobering words of the Lord:

"*Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few* (Mt 7:13, 14)… *Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it*" (Mt 7:24-27).

Entering the Kingdom is possible for us, then, if we put the Lord's teachings into practice, something which may cause us great hardship. Living the Lord's way may cost us friends, a job, even family support. It will certainly cost us the freedom to live according to our own desires, unmindful of the needs of others. As the nineteenth-century elder of the Optina Monastery in Russia, St Anthony of Optina, wrote in a letter to one of his spiritual children: "Of course, it would be easier to get to paradise with a full stomach, all snuggled up in a soft feather-bed, but what is required is to carry one's cross along the way, for the Kingdom of God is not attained by enduring one or two troubles, but many!"

The Church and the Kingdom

The ultimate expression of the Kingdom will be in the age to come when Christ, seated at the Father's right, shall reign forever and ever. There He shall be surrounded by the saints – those who have allowed the Kingdom within them to mature fully through communion with God in prayer and faithfulness to His teachings in action.

The Church on earth is, as it were, the "anteroom" of the kingdom of heaven: the vestibule through which we pass in order to enjoy the presence of God within. We enter this "vestibule" through the necessary doorway of baptism. As the Lord told Nicodemos, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*" (Jn 3:5).

Yet for those outside the Church their goodwill toward believers is a kind of baptism into the kingdom, the "baptism" of love. As we read in Christ's parable of the judgment, "*Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'*" (Mt 25:34, 40).

January 17 – St Anthony the Great

THE LORD JESUS SAID to the rich young ruler, "*You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me*" (Lk 18:22). This young man declined, but others through the centuries have left all and followed Him. In times of persecution they followed Him to the cross (or the sword, the wild beasts, or the flames) as martyrs. But what if there is no persecution – how can one follow Christ?"

A number of early Christians sought to follow Him into the wilderness. Ascetics, both men and women, left their homes and withdrew from society to follow the One who had said, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*" (Lk 9:58). The first to do so, like St Takla, the first woman martyr, left their homes to dwell outside their town or village in relative seclusion. Two others, whom the Church remembers this week, went further than that.

The first, St Paul of Thebes (January 15), is revered as the first hermit in Egypt. *During the persecution of Decius Paul fled to the Theban desert where he lived in a cave for almost 100 years before his death in 342.*

We know more about the second, St Anthony the Great (January 17), the "father of monks" whose life was written by his contemporary, St Athanasius the Great, Archbishop of Alexandria. This work was soon translated into numerous languages and spread the fame of St Anthony and of the ascetic life throughout the Churches of East and West.

"Sell all that you have…"

*Anthony (c. 251-356) was the son of landowners from the village of Coma on the Nile, south of Alexandria. When he was 18 years old, his parents died, leaving his unmarried sister in his care. A few months later he had what we might call a "*Conversion Experience" while attending the

Liturgy in the village church. He heard the Gospel passage quoted at the start of this article and, as St Athanasius tells it, “As though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account, Anthony went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers— they were three hundred acres, productive and very fair— that they should be no more an obstruction to himself and his sister. And all the rest that was movable he sold, and having got together much money he gave it to the poor, reserving a little however for his sister's sake.”

Soon after he felt called to a more ascetic way of life. Placing his sister in the care of “known and faithful virgins,” Anthony began living in solitude outside his village, visiting any nearby ascetics and studying their way of life. When he was about 35, he settled among the tombs at the edge of the Western Desert, giving himself over to prayer and fasting. A friend bringing him bread one day found him collapsed outside the tomb and brought him back to the village. St Athanasius says that Anthony had a divine visitation in which he was told, “since you have endured, and have not been overcome, I will always help you, and will make your name known everywhere.' Having heard this, Antony arose and prayed, and received such strength that he perceived that he had more power in his body than formerly.”

20 Years at Deir al-Meimun

As soon as Anthony recovered he headed further into the desert, settling in the ruins of an abandoned fort in the mountains on the other side of the Nile. Friends would come to bring him food but he would not leave the fort, speaking to them through a slit in the wall. St Athanasius says that these friends often heard him beset by demons and that they “used often to come expecting to find him dead, and would hear him singing, ‘Let God arise and let His enemies be scattered, let them that hate Him flee before His face. As smoke vanishes, let them vanish; as wax melts before the face of fire, so let the sinners perish from the face of God;’ and again, ‘All nations compassed me about, and in the name of the Lord I requited them.’”

Anthony’s reputation spread over the years and people increasingly came to see him, hoping to imitate his way of life. After twenty years “Anthony came forth, as from a shrine, initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. Then for the first time he was seen outside the fort by those who came to see him. And they, when they saw him, wondered at the sight, for he looked as he had years before. He was neither fat, like a man without exercise, nor lean from fasting and striving with the demons. He was just the same as they had known him before his retirement.”

Anthony now encouraged others to settle nearby and adopt his way of life. The numbers so increased that, as Athanasius says, “cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was colonized by monks.”

Forays to Alexandria

Although other monks leaved nearby, Anthony still lived in seclusion for most of the time, coming together with them for occasional worship and instruction. He first left this place of

solitude in 311, during the persecution of Maximinus when Christians were being rounded up and taken to Alexandria. He presented himself publicly in the city but noone dared touch him. He spent some time ministering to the suffering Christians there. When the persecution ceased, he then returned to his cell.

Anthony now resolved to return to solitude. He settled further into the mountains and allowed other monks to bring him food once a month. He would descend to the other monks from time to time to instruct and encourge them in their monastic life.

Anthony returned to Alexandria to refute the rumor that he sided with the Arians. He publicly denounced the Arian teaching, calling it the forerunner of the antichrist. During his stay there he healed many and freed others from demons.

As the years progressed more and more people came to live the monastic life in Anthony's shadow. His fame even reached Emperor Constantine and his sons who wrote to him seeking guidance. Anthony lived to be 105. His body was placed in an unmarked grave, as he directed.

Asceticism and Us

What does the witness of St Anthony – and of the ascetic life in general – say to people in the world? We are all called to follow Christ, if not to a martyr's death or to a foreign mission, but where is He leading us? St Paul gives us this answr: "*If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth*" (Col 3:1, 2).

Asceticism is essentially a refocusing of our hearts away from "things on the earth" to enable us to develop our relationship to Christ where He is now. While people in the world have important family and career responsibilities, we also have a great deal of free time which we devote to recreation or entertainment of one sort or another. In our society we are increasingly addicted to non-stop music, TV or Internet, with their increasingly godless atmosphere. What time do we have left for prayer, Scripture reading or service? What spirit do we have left for relishing fellowship with God? Asceticism for us might well involve turning from such pursuits at least in part to set our minds "*on things above, where Christ is.*"

January 18 – Saints Athanasius and Cyril, Archbishops of Alexandria

ON JANUARY 18 the Byzantine Churches remember two monumental archbishops of Alexandria, Athanasius the Great and Cyril I. These hierarchs lived in the fourth and fifth centuries respectively, at a time when the administrative structures as well as the fundamental theology of the Church were being fixed. Both were instrumental in combatting major heresies on the nature of Christ. Athanasius championed the fight against Arianism while Cyril stood against the teachings of Nestorios, defeating him at the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431).

Today the second largest city in Egypt, Alexandria was founded in the fourth century BC by Alexander the Great as a link between Greece and the fertile Nile valley. Within a century it had

become the largest city in the Mediterranean world and the leading center of Hellenistic culture. It was the capital of Egypt for almost 1000 years as well, and the home of the world's largest library until the Islamic conquest in the seventh century AD.

Alexandria was also the home of the largest Jewish community in the ancient world. It was this community which produced the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in the late second century BC. The Septuagint was used by Christians from the beginning of the Church and is quoted regularly in the New Testament. It became the basis for the Latin and other translations that were developed with the spread of the Gospel in the first millennium.

By the time of St Constantine the Great, when the persecution of Christians ceased, Alexandria was the intellectual center of the Church, home to such theologians as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Egypt was also the spiritual center of monasticism which first arose there with Saints Anthony and Pachomios. When local Churches were ranked at the First Ecumenical Council, Alexandria was declared the first see after Rome.

With the establishment of Constantinople a few years later as the "New Rome" a rivalry grew up between these two Churches, which was only resolved at the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451) when the imperial capital displaced Alexandria as the second see in Christendom.

St Athanasius the Great (*c.* 297–373)

Born and educated in the Christian community of Alexandria, Athanasius was ordained a deacon in 319 and attended the First Ecumenical Council in 325 as aide to his archbishop, Alexander. The Council confronted Arianism, the belief that Christ's essence was similar to that of God (in Greek, *hom**oi**ousios*) rather than one with Him (*hom**o**ousios*). The Council affirmed the latter belief and incorporated it into the Nicene Creed which confesses Christ as "one in essence with the Father." Despite the Council, Arianism remained a problem for the Church for the rest of the century.

On the archbishop's death in 328 the young Athanasius was elected to succeed him. In his 45 years as Archbishop of Alexandria Athanasios spent 17 years in exile, deposed by the emperors Constantius II and Valens, who were sympathetic to the Arians, as well as by Julian the Apostate. Because of these conflicts – and because he prevailed against them all – he came to be known as "Athanasius Against the World."

Exiled to Gaul, Germany and Rome Athanasius found himself in the position of being the champion of Nicene Orthodoxy throughout the Christian world. He distinguished himself as the Church's principal theologian against Arianism, teaching that the purpose of Christ's incarnation is our deification: "God became man so that we might become divine." He concluded that, since our union with the Father is based on our union with Christ, our deification depends on Christ

being divine. The same, he reasoned, was true of the Holy Spirit; his teaching would be confirmed at the Second Ecumenical Council (381), a few years after his death on May 2, 373. Athanasius is revered in all the historic Churches of East and West.

St Cyril I of Alexandria (*c.* 376–444)

Like Athanasius, St Cyril was involved in theological controversies over the nature of Christ and was endorsed at an Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431). While Athanasius contested with pro-Arian emperors, Cyril was in conflict with his rival for the second place in the hierarchy, Nestorios, the Archbishop of Constantinople.

Cyril was the nephew of Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria, the implacable enemy of St John Chrysostom. Cyril accompanied Theophilus to Constantinople where that bishop held the "Synod of the Oak" in 402 and deposed Chrysostom. Theophilus died on Oct 15, 412; on the 18th Cyril was consecrated to succeed his uncle.

For some years Cyril refused to commemorate St John Chrysostom in the diptychs of his Church, in spite of the requests of Chrysostom's successor. He excluded from the Church the Novatians whom his uncle had tolerated. He also engaged in a long-standing rivalry with Orestes, the Prefect of Egypt who was jealous of the archbishop's influence over the people. Cyril's deepest resentment, however, was for Nestorios, the Archbishop of Constantinople.

On becoming archbishop, Nestorios found himself embroiled in a local controversy involving those who believed that God had been incarnate in Christ and that therefore the Holy Virgin was Theotokos. Others felt that it was only Christ's humanity which had been born and that therefore Theotokos was not an appropriate title. Nestorios' own teaching seemed to favor the anti-Theotokos faction and the battle was enjoined. A series of councils attempting to deal with the issue culminated in the Third Ecumenical Council, over which St Cyril presided.

Cyril had legitimate theological reasons for opposing Nestorios – it was not an abstract nature which was born in Bethlehem but a Person. The Holy Virgin gave birth to that Person who was God the Word Incarnate. However Cyril so manipulated events by excluding pro-Nestorios bishops and inciting the crowds including the monks to riot against the "ungodly" that the emperor, Theodosios II, labeled him a "proud pharaoh." Nevertheless, when the Council deposed Nestorios and condemned his teaching, the Emperor exiled him to a monastery in Egypt where Cyril could keep an eye on him.

The Church saw Cyril's teaching as decisive in the development of theology and praises him as a Pillar of Faith and "the Seal of all the Fathers." Besides his important essays *On the Incarnation* and *That Christ Is One*, Cyril wrote extensive commentaries on the Gospels which still survive. His concept of Christ as "One nature of the Word of God incarnate" would be refined in the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 451) by the teachings of St Leo the Great, Pope of Rome.

The Church of Alexandria was divided in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon. The Greeks accepted St Leo's clarification but the native speakers (Copts) did not, feeling that it went against St Cyril's teaching. In time two Churches were formed: the majority Coptic (Oriental) Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox (centered in Alexandria).

January 22 – The Holy Apostle Timothy

THE GREATEST JOY OF EVERY PRIEST or other mentor may be seeing a pupil follow in his footsteps. St Paul was no exception. He traveled with several disciples at one time or another: Barnabas, John Mark, Silas (all of whom we honor as saints). His favorite, the one he called his "*true son in the faith*" (1 Tm 1:2), was Timothy.

According to Acts 16:1-9, Timothy was a believer, the son of a pagan father and a Jewish mother in the Anatolian town of Lystra. St Paul had first visited Lystra with Barnabas in c. AD 48 and preached the Gospel in the surrounding area. Possibly Timothy's mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, became believers at that time (see 2 Tm 1:5).

When Paul returned to Lystra three years later he proposed taking Timothy along on his travels. Although Eunice was Jewish, her husband was not and Timothy had not been circumcised. Paul arranged for that to be done (see Acts 16:1-5) and the two set off together.

For several years Timothy accompanied Paul on his travels in Europe and Asia Minor. Timothy worked with Paul as he evangelized Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonika, Corinth and Macedonia, sometimes visiting churches on his own as Paul's emissary. In witness to their relationship, Timothy is listed along with Paul as the author of several New Testament epistles: 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. "*He served with me in the gospel,"* Paul would write, *"as a son with his father*" (Phil 2:22).

Timothy in Ephesus

In the early 60s Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to personally oversee that community where doctrinal speculation was rife. St Paul's two Epistles to Timothy offered his former companion guidance in shepherding the Ephesian Christians.

According to the fourth-fifth century *Acts of Timothy*, this disciple remained in Ephesus even after Paul's death. Timothy himself was slain by a mob during a pagan festival in AD 97.

Based on his own experience Paul warned Timothy that, "*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*" (2 Tm 3:12). Paul himself had been one of the first to persecute Christians when he was an observant Jew. This persecution began as soon as the Apostles started proclaiming Jesus as the risen Messiah.

The Romans, who cared nothing about Jewish messiahs, feared the Christians, who preferred the Kingdom of God to the Roman Empire. They refused to honor the Roman gods – considered a

civil duty – or to venerate the emperor as a god himself. They appeared to be a divisive force and they continued to grow.

All the Apostles except for John died at the hands of either Jews or Romans intent on eradicating this new sect. Paul himself would suffer death for his faith, beheaded in Rome in c AD 68. Sometimes Christians suffered in sporadic attacks of random mobs. In the second and third centuries it was the state itself which was responsible for many deaths. It is thought that, before the Roman persecutions ended in the early fourth century, upwards of 100,000 believers had lost their lives or been deprived of their possessions.

In the face of persecution St Paul proposes what may at first seem an inadequate, if not strange, response: a two-pronged fidelity to the teachings that Timothy has learned and from whom he learned them. The Word of God and the living witness of the believers who mentored them, Paul affirms, should be the most compelling supports for committed Christians under threat of persecution.

What Scriptures Does Paul Recommend?

"…*from childhood*," St Paul reminds Timothy, "*you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*

"*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim 3:15-17).

Just which Scriptures could Timothy have known from his childhood? When St Paul first met Timothy's family in c. AD 48, and for decades afterwards, many of the New Testament books were yet to be written. In the next 50 years the Gospels and most of the epistles were being circulated, but it took some time for all the local Churches to become aware of them or to accept them as inspired. For most of this time – and certainly while Paul was writing to Timothy – when Christians spoke of "the Scriptures," they meant the Old Testament. St. Paul is encouraging Christians under persecution to resort to Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. As St Clement of Alexandria wrote in his *Exhortation to the Heathens*, "These books are truly holy as they sanctify and deify."

In this Paul echoes the witness of Abraham in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). When asked to send an emissary from paradise to the rich man's brothers, Abraham replies, "*They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them*" (v. 29). When the rich man protests, Abraham answers, "*If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead*" (v. 31). Spectacular wonders amaze us but don't necessarily lead us to faith; the Scriptures speak to truly believing hearts and strengthen the gift of faith within them. This is why St John Chrysostom would comment, "One single word from the divine Scriptures is more effective than fire! It softens the cruelty of the soul and prepares her for every good work" (*Ninth Homily on 2 Tim*).

Witness of the Saints

Besides the Scriptures, St Paul commends to Timothy "*the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them"* (v.14). Timothy had worked with Paul for several years and knew his teaching, which, earlier in the chapter, he called "*my gospel*" (2 Tim 2:8), the saving mystery of Christ which would later be put in writing in the four Gospels. He also knew how Paul lived out his faith in daily life and how he behaved under trials and persecution. The living witness of Timothy's mentor would be a source of strength for him when he too suffered for his faith in Christ. Over the centuries until today, the encouragement of believing parents and spouses as well as teachers and fellow Christians would provide the support from which martyrs drew the strength to face the suffering they endured for Christ.

Called before time by God and becoming a disciple of holy Paul, you were an initiate in the divine mysteries. Outstanding in your life, keeping the Faith intact until death, you became a faithful hierarch of God, O holy apostle Timothy. After denouncing the worship of idols as foolishness, you were stoned and beaten, receiving the crown of martyrdom. O blessed one, intercede for us who celebrate your sacred memory with faith.

Come, O people, let us sing to Timothy, the apostle distinguished as a herald of the Gospel. Let us say, "Hail, venerable offshoot of the Faith, who were like a son to holy Paul! Hail, venerable model of virtue, thrice-wise mouth of the divine Word! Hail, divine flute announcing God to the whole world! Hail, pillar of Faith, on which the Church finds support!"

Vespers Stichera, Feast of St. Timothy (Jan 22)

January 25 – St Gregory the Theologian

DID YOU MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS today? Or say a prayer to the Holy Trinity? Eastern Christians and most Western ones as well did so. Few recognize, however, that we have St Gregory the Theologian to thank for expressing with such clarity the Church's teaching on the Triune nature of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Scholar and Ascetic

Raised in a devout and well-to-do Christian family in Cappadocia (his father was the bishop of Nazianzos), Gregory (329-389) received a superior classical education in Cappadocia, then in Alexandria and finally in Athens, the Oxford or Harvard of his day. In Athens he befriended two fellow students who affected his life in vastly different ways. The first, whom we know as St. Basil the Great, became a friend and mentor. When the second, Julian the Apostate, became emperor he sought to restore paganism in the empire thus becoming Gregory's enemy.

Besides studying rhetoric and Greek philosophy, Gregory and Basil also studied the existing Christian literature. They collaborated on a *Philokalia* or anthology of the writings of Origen and shared an interest in asceticism and monasticism. At the completion of his studies Gregory taught rhetoric for a time then joined Basil in the community which he had organized in Pontus.

Gregory's father wanted him to assist in pastoring the Church at Nazianzos and ordained his son a presbyter. Gregory was reluctant to leave his solitude in Pontus but found his place in the Lord's service at Nazianzos. That Church had been divided by theological differences but Gregory was able through his skillful oratory and tactful approach to reconcile the opposing groups. He would use these same abilities to confront the persistent problem of Arianism in the wider Church.

Gregory and Arianism

The First Ecumenical Council (AD 325), following the lead of St Athanasius, had clarified the Church's faith in the unity of the Father and the Son in the face of the Arian challenge. The Arians continued to dominate the Church in certain areas even after the council, due in great measure to the support of two pro-Arian emperors, Constantius and Valens. St Gregory would be the one who turned the tide against them in the Christian East.

From the mid 360s Gregory and Basil were involved in combating Arianism in Cappadocia, including public debates with the agents of Emperor Valens. The two were successful and, in 369, Basil was chosen to become Archbishop of Caesarea, the provincial capital. In 372 Basil created a bishopric in Sasima and persuaded Gregory to become its bishop. Basil was "stacking the deck" in support of his position in the local controversies.

Gregory resented being sent to what he would later describe as an "utterly dreadful, pokey little hole; a paltry horse-stop on the main road ... devoid of water, vegetation, or the company of gentlemen ... this was my Church of Sasima!"

Gregory's stay there was very short as later the same year his father became ill and Gregory returned to Nazianzos to assist him in his final days. When his father died in 374 Gregory refused to succeed him. Instead he retired to a monastery in Seleukia where he remained for three years.

Under Emperor Valens the Church in Constantinople had come firmly under Arian control. In 378 Valens died and was succeeded by Theodosios I, a strong supporter of the Nicene Council. The supporters of Nicaea were encouraged to return and they requested Gregory's help in reestablishing the Nicene faith in their Church. Gregory reluctantly agreed and established a chapel in his cousin's villa where he taught Nicene Orthodoxy. He endured much opposition and even physical attacks for almost two years. Finally Theodosios decided to expel the Arians once and for all and appointed Gregory as Archbishop of Constantinople.

The emperor also resolved to further clarify the Church's teachings. In 381 he convoked the Second Ecumenical Council (I Constantinople). Gregory was a controversial figure at the council over which he briefly presided. He was frequently challenged and ultimately resigned his see. "I was not happy when I ascended the throne," he told the council, "and gladly would I descend it." He returned to Nazianzos but resigned that office in 383 because of poor health and retired to his family's estate where he lived in seclusion until his death in 389.

Gregory as Theologian

Gregory's writings, especially his five Triadic Homilies, did much to affirm the Nicene Council's teachings on the Trinity. He was one of the first to attempt a systematic theology of the one God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Gregory was particularly instrumental in clarifying Orthodox teaching on the Holy Spirit, affirming that He was of one essence with the Father and the Son. "If he has the same rank as I have," Gregory taught, "how can he make me God, or how can he join me with deity?" He affirmed that salvation is nothing less than a sharing in the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit who makes the light of God present in the world.

Gregory was also the first to speak of the Spirit as proceeding from the Father, a concept which the Second Council would add to the Nicene Creed.

Since "theology" in the usage of the day referred to the specific study of God, and since Gregory's teachings on the subject were so seminal, the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon) accorded Gregory the title "*The Theologian*." In Eastern Christianity only John the Theologian, first-century author of the fourth Gospel, and Symeon the New Theologian, eleventh-century teacher on the Holy Spirit's presence within the believer, have received this recognition.

Gregory as Poet

Gregory often wrote in the forms of classical Greek poetry. Later writers in turn would recast Gregory's teachings in their own poetry. Thus the beginning of his Paschal Homily below would become part of St John of Damascus' Paschal Canon which we still use at Orthros on Pascha.

"Yesterday, I was crucified with Him;
Today, I am glorified with Him;
Yesterday, I died with Him;
Today I am quickened with Him;
Yesterday, I was buried with Him;
Today, I rise with Him.

"But let us offer to Him Who suffered and rose again for us — you will think perhaps that I am going to say gold, or silver, or woven work, or transparent and costly stones, the mere passing material things of earth, that remains here below, and is for the most part always possessed by slaves of the world, and of the Prince of the World.

Let us offer ourselves, the possession most precious to God, and most fitting.
Let us give back the image that is made after the Image.
Let us recognize our Dignity; let us honor our Archetype.
Let us know the power of the Mystery and for what Christ died.
Let us become like Christ, since Christ has become like us.
Let us become gods for His sake, since He for ours became Man."

January 30 – The Three Holy Hierarchs

WHERE DO WE FIND THE TRUTHS of our faith? As could be expected, we look first to the Holy Scriptures, the revealed word of God. The Scriptures, however, were not written as dogmatic treatises but as records of God's intervention in our history. As such they do not necessarily address concerns that arose later among Christians. They must be interpreted in a way that accords with the practices of "*the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth*" (1 Tim 3:15).

Clarifying the Church's teachings from the earliest times been the task of its leaders: first the apostles and later their successors, the bishops. While each of them individually has the mission to teach in the name of the Church, the Body of Christ, the determination of correct doctrine has always been a task for its leaders as a group. Thus the Acts of the Apostles records how, all together, the apostles settled the question of Jewish ritual and dietary requirements (see Acts 15:8-29).

Similar gatherings of bishops, called synods or councils, were held in the early Church as it began to develop structures (dioceses, eparchies). The first ones mentioned in Church annals took place in the mid-second century in Rome and Ephesus. By the end of that century these local decisions were communicated to Churches in other areas. In the third century it became customary for these councils to be held at regular intervals to discuss matters affecting the Churches. When Christianity was officially recognized in the fourth century Roman Empire, the Ecumenical Council (convoking bishops from all over the empire) was introduced. Beginning with Nicaea I, ecumenical councils became "the court of last resort" for settling doctrinal disputes in the early Church.

Who Taught the Teachers?

The Nicene Creed and the teachings of later councils would definitively express the Church's teaching on certain subjects, like the incarnation of Christ. But who taught the Council Fathers and helped them express these doctrines in the way that they did? At the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 381) the bishops sought clarity by consulting the writings of certain noted hierarchs. Extracts from works by Peter I and Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyprian, Ambrose, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa were read as authoritative teachers. The idea that certain writers were ***Fathers of the Church*** was born.

By the time of the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, 481) it was common for the Churches to see some Fathers as ecumenical teachers and hierarchs, whose writings should be revered after the Scriptures and any authoritative council doctrines. Thus at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople II, 553) the assembled bishops affirmed, "Hold fast to the decrees of the four councils, and in every way follow the holy Fathers, Athanasius, Hilary, Basil, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Theophilus, John Chrysostom of Constantinople, Cyril, Augustine, Proclus, Leo and their writings on the true faith" (Session 1).

The writings of these Fathers are not considered infallible, but the Church sees the consensus that emerges from their teaching as reliable interpretations of the Scriptures for the life of the Church.

The Three Holy Hierarchs

The Cappadocians were particularly instrumental in the defeat of Arianism in the Christian East. While this doctrine, that the Son was like the Father but not of the same essence, had been formally rejected at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, it became even more popular in the years that followed. Several emperors were partial to it as it seemed to be acceptable to a broader number of their Christian subjects. While Arianism survived in many places until the seventh century, it was all but eliminated in Cappadocia (Asia Minor) because of the influence of these Fathers.

The writings of these Fathers contributed significantly to the development of Byzantine theology and liturgy in the centuries that followed. Due largely to his treatises on the Trinity, St Gregory was accorded the title "Theologian" at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Only two others have been given that distinction in the East: the first being St John the Apostle and the third St Simeon the New Theologian.

St John Chrysostom (c.347-407), originally from Antioch, had been called to Constantinople in 397 to be its archbishop. This Father was popular with the poor but castigated the wealthy – including Empress Eudoxia – for their extravagant lifestyles. He had little interest in or sympathy for the kind of politics inherent in being bishop of the imperial capital. Within five years his enemies had begun a successful campaign against him and he was exiled to the Caucasus where he died on September 14, 404 in what is today Abkhazia. The next year his remains were brought back to Constantinople and buried with honor, an event we remember on January 27.

As Archbishop of Caesarea, St Basil had devoted his energies to ordering the Liturgy. His Liturgy would become the usual rite of Constantinople. When St John Chrysostom became Archbishop of Constantinople he too provided an order for the Liturgy. Over the next few centuries their arrangements would spread throughout the Greek-speaking Churches and in the Slavic world. We still use their prayers in the Byzantine Churches and remembered these Fathers at every Liturgy today.

Who Is the Greatest?

When the Lord's apostles disagreed over which of them was the greatest, He diffused their squabble by setting a child in the place of honor. Something similar happened in the case of these "January Fathers."

In the eleventh century monks and teachers in the imperial capital, Constantinople, were rowing about which of these Fathers was the greatest. Their partisans cited the various contributions of each Father to the theology, liturgy and monastic tradition of the Church. As the issue became more widely known, ordinary believers began taking sides as well. Some called themselves "Basilians," others referred to themselves as "Johnites" and still others as "Gregorians."

The question was finally resolved in 1084 with the establishment of a common feast for all three saints: the Synaxis of the Three Ecumenical Teachers and Holy Hierarchs. According to the Synaxarion, each of the saints appeared, first each separately and then all three together, to John Mavropos, a learned author and poet who served as the Metropolitan of Euchaïta (today's Avkat).

The saints reportedly told Metropolitan John, "We three are one, as you see, close to God and nothing can separate us or make us contend… There is no first or second among us… Arise, therefore, and tell those who are quarrelling not to be divided into parties over us because in life and death we had no desire other than to bring peace and unity to everyone." In response the metropolitan undertook the task of reconciling the conflicting groups.

As a symbol and expression of their unity, the saints also urged Metropolitan John to establish a common feast for all three. He established the feast on January 30 and composed a single service for all three. The metropolitan chose January as the most suitable month for this commemoration, because all three Fathers are celebrated in that month.

St John of Euchaïta

A native of Paphlagonia in Asia Minor, John had become a respected scholar and teacher in the capital and a member of the circle of intellectuals patronized by the Emperor, Constantine IX Monomakhos. In 1050, after two years as speaker of the court, he fell out of favor with the emperor and was sent to Euchaïta, some 265 miles from the capital, as its metropolitan, what we might call a "lateral promotion."

The metropolitan called it an "honorable exile" and sought to be recalled to the capital. At some point, he was apparently permitted to retire to the Agia Petra Monastery in Constantinople, sometime in the 1070s.

His collected works include numerous poems, essays, letters and homilies. His most beloved poem is the devotional canon to "the Most Sweet Jesus," found in many popular Byzantine prayerbooks. He is also thought by some to have composed the small paraklitic canon to the Theotokos sung during the Dormition Fast in Byzantine Churches.

The Poetry of This Feast

In addition to the canons and hymns of Metropolitan John, the Church service for this feast also includes works by Neilos Xanthopoulos and Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople.

From the Service of the Feast

As is meet, let us glorify John and Basil, with Gregory: the three heralds of the great Trinity, the instruments of grace, the harps of the Spirit and right famous clarions of proclamation, awesome and clearly resonant, who thunder forth from the heights and declare to the ends of the earth the glory of God. (*first sticheron of vespers, by John of Euchaïta*)

As is meet, today let us praise together those spiritual initiates of the mysteries, the noetic clarions of God, the divine reflections: Basil the Great, the divine Gregory of fiery inspiration, and John, truly goldenmouthed, who pour forth upon us golden streams of doctrines. "Hail, trinity of Hierarchs!" *(first apostichon by Nilos Xanthopoulos*).

Rejoice, O trinity of Hierarchs, great bulwark of the Church, pillars of piety, confirmation of the faithful and downfall of heretics, who shepherded the people of Christ with divine teachings and nurtured them with diverse virtues – O manifest preachers of grace, who set forth laws for the fullness of Christ's Church! O guides to the highest and gates of paradise, entreat Christ that He send down great mercy upon our souls! (*first sticheron at the Ainos by Nilos Xanthopoulos*)

Other Saints of January

St Maximos the Confessor *(January 21)* – A monk and writer, Maximos (c. 580-662) opposed the monothelite compromise on the nature of Christ which taught that Christ had only one will. Maximos insisted that this teaching compromised the doctrine of Chalcedon that Christ was completely God and man. He was tortured and exiled for his position (hence the title "Confessor") but eventually vindicated at the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople III, 681-682).

St Ephrem the Syrian *(January 28)* –Born in the Syriac city of Nisibis on the Persian border, Ephrem (c. 306-373) is known as "the harp of the Spirit" because he expressed his theological thought in poetry. His over 400 hymns are especially revered in the Syriac Churches where they figure in the Liturgy. His *Hymns Against Heresies* supported the doctrine that Christ was fully human and divine.

St Isaac the Syrian *(January 28)* – A native of Bahrain, Isaac entered the monastic life at an early age, in the seventh century. After only a few months as bishop of Nineveh, Isaac left the active life and spent the rest of his days as a solitary, devoting himself to study and writing. His ascetical homilies greatly influenced the spiritual life of the Syriac, Greek and Slavic Churches as well as his own Church of the East.

January 31 – The Holy Martyrs Cyrus and John

IT IS NOT OFTEN that the Byzantine, Coptic and Roman Churches commemorate saints on the same day. It is true in the case of saints like the holy martyrs Cyrus and John, who are remembered on January 31. They were not Apostles who brought the Gospel to new lands or

Church Fathers whose thought influenced Churches all over the world. Who were they and what does their witness have to say to us today?

Cyrus the Unmercenary Healer

Nothing is known of the early lives of these saints. We do not know whether either or both of them were born into Christian families. We first meet them later in life, during the persecution of Diocletian (303- 305), which was particularly fierce in Egypt. At that time Cyrus was a physician in Alexandria who treated the sick with potions he developed in his workshop, a place later transformed into a shrine.

Cyrus is celebrated as one of the great "Unmercenary Healers" – those who would not accept payment for their services, seeing their skill as a gift from God. This practice attracted many of his patients to Christ and, consequently, brought Cyrus to the attention of the authorities. Denounced to the city prefect, Cyrus fled and took refuge in the Roman province of Arabia (southern Jordan and northwest Saudi Arabia today). There he abandoned the practice of medicine and adopted the monastic life. When the persecution waned, Cyrus returned to Egypt. John, a young Christian soldier from Edessa in northern Mesopotamia was on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, when he heard of the physician-become-monk, Cyrus. He sought him out, becoming his companion and disciple.

The Great Persecution

Diocletian abdicated on May 1, 305. His successor, Maximinus, renewed the persecution of Christians the next year. The contemporary Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Martyrs of Palestine*, writes that tens, twenties, even hundreds of Christians were put to death on a single day in Egypt, making it the region which suffered the most during the persecutions. According to one report, 660 Christians were killed in Alexandria alone between 303 and 311. To this day the Coptic Church structures its calendar around this persecution rather than the birth of Christ.

Maximinus had revised the procedure for registering citizens to include women and children. This enabled the authorities to summon even children and infants to offer sacrifice to the Roman deities. It happened that at Canopus, on the outskirts of Alexandria, officials arrested a Christian family and brought them to the city to sacrifice. Along with their mother, Athanasia, three youngsters had been arrested: fifteen-year old Theoctista, thirteen-year old Theodota and eleven-year old Eudoxia.

At that time in Egypt Christians were often mutilated and exiled to work in mines, if not killed outright. When Cyrus and John heard of it, they were concerned that the girls might not be strong enough to preserve their faith. They resolved to go to Alexandria to comfort and encourage these youngsters. When their presence became known, they too were arrested and beheaded together with the others on January31, 311. They were buried at the Church of St Mark in Canopus.

Their Wonderworking Relics

Cyrus and John had put themselves in mortal danger to sustain the faith of Athanasia and her daughters. As a result they personified the Lord Jesus' teaching, "*Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it*" (Mk 8:35). The witness of Ss. Cyrus and John would come to be spread far beyond the place of their martyrdom.

In 414 St Cyril of Alexandria had the relics of Ss. Cyrus and John brought to Menouthis, a city northeast of Alexandria. Menouthis was sacred to the pagan deities Isis and Serapis. At that time there was a temple at Menouthis famed for its oracles and cures which attracted even some simple Christians. St. Cyril thought to replace this cult by establishing a shrine to St. Cyrus the Unmercenary Healer. As Cyril explained in a homily, he had a vision in which an angel instructed him to bring the relics of St Cyrus to Menouthis in order to do battle with Isis.

When the floor of St Mark's was opened, two graves were found and the story of Cyrus' companion John came to light. Both bodies were brought to Menouthis with much fanfare, an event commemorated in the Byzantine Churches on June 28. As St Cyril described it, "The holy martyrs, Ss. Cyrus and John, came forth ready to do battle for the Christian religion… As their reward for their love for Christ, they received the power to trample upon Satan and expel the force of evil spirits" (Homily 18, 3).

St Cyril knew that it would be futile to forbid Christians to visit "the Mistress," as Isis was known; he did, however, insist that they first visit the relics of Ss. Cyrus and John. This expression of Christian devotion caused the priests of Isis to refuse them entry to her shrine, effectively bringing its popularity to an end!

Entrusted to the care of the Pachomian monastery of Tabennisi, the shrine of Ss. Cyrus and John became known throughout the Middle East and beyond for the healings reported there. This in turn spread the fame of the saints and the city eventually became known as Aba-Kyr (Father Cyrus).

Perhaps the most famous healing attributed to these saints was that of St Sophronios of Jerusalem who was cured of ophthalmia, an inflammation of the eyes which often led to total blindness. In gratitude he composed an encomium in praise of the saints recounting a number of miracles attributed to them. In English this work is generally called *The Seventy Miracles of Ss. Cyrus and John.*

It is thought that St Sophronios was to some extent responsible for the rise of devotion to these saints in the West. In 634 Sophronios sent a copy of his *Miracles* along with some relics of Ss. Cyrus and John to Pope Honorius in Rome. Sophronios was seeking the pope's support in the doctrinal controversies of the day. In time three churches were erected in Rome in honor of these saints, mistakenly called "St Passera" (Pa Ser = Aba Kyr).

In the tenth century the relics remaining at Menouthis were relocated to a church bearing their name in Old Cairo, the new center of Coptic Church life. In 960 this church was destroyed in a riot and the relics moved to the nearby Church of St Barbara where they remain in a chapel dedicated to their memory. A portion of their relics is also enshrined in the nearby monastery of Deir Tadros.

Today the wonderworkers Cyrus and John are like two stars rising above us, those martyrs who heal the sorrows of our souls. The one, imitating the angels, fought the good fight in solitude, in which he excelled until the end, when he was joined to Christ through the blood of martyrdom. The other, enlisted as a soldier on earth, was registered in the role of the heavenly armies. On their feast, they grant healing to those who celebrate it with faith; and they intercede with Christ for our souls.

O faithful, with canticles of praise let us magnify Cyrus and John, those brothers in spirit who were of one mind concerning the body. Let us praise, together with them, the generous Athanasia and her daughters Theodota, Theoctista and Eudoxia, the victorious martyrs who preserved their virginity. They always intercede before Christ for our souls.

From the Services of the Feast

February 2 – Feast of the Encounter of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ
Hebrews 7:7-17 – Luke 2:22-40

Come to Expel the Darkness

WHEN SHOULD YOU TAKE DOWN your Christmas tree? In our society some people throw theirs out on December 26! In the Christian East, however, many wait until today, the feast of the Infant Christ's Encounter (*Hypapante*) with His people in the persons of Simeon and Anna. This feast celebrates the event recorded in St Luke's Gospel: "*Now when the days of her purification according to the Law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord*" (Lk 2:22). While there they meet Simeon and Anna who recognize God's decisive presence in this Child. Through them Christ encounters for the first time those who were awaiting the Messiah's coming.

The passage brings several questions to mind:

1 –What is "her purification"?

According to the Torah, *"The LORD said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites: "A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over*"" (Lev 12:1-4).

In Jewish law any participation in the intimate experiences of life and death, including the spilling of blood – the carrier of life – makes a person ritually unclean, that is, incapable of performing ceremonial acts such as temple worship. Ceremonial uncleanness is not a question of moral impurity but a recognition that the worship of God transcends the earth and its ways. Someone touched by childbirth or death required purification in specified ways.

2 – Why is a child "presented to the Lord"?

Again according to the Torah, "*Every firstborn of man among your sons, you shall redeem*" (Ex 13:13). The first of everything (crops, animals, etc.) was to be offered to God in sacrifice: an acknowledgement that it comes from Him and is His. Children could be "redeemed" by offering a gift to the temple in exchange for the child. Orthodox Jews still observe this rite today, exchanging five silver shekels (or their equivalent in local currency) for the child.

3 – Why do we stress "the Encounter"?

The encounter with Simeon and Anna takes us beyond the practices of the Torah to the mystery of God's saving plan. As St. Luke tells it, "*it had been revealed to him* [Simeon] *by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ*" (Lk 2:26). He takes the Christ child in his arms and prays what we call the Canticle of Simeon: "*Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples: a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel*" (Lk 2:29-32). We repeat this canticle at the end of every day (vespers) and on completing the Divine Liturgy, as well as when any child is presented in church forty days after its birth.

Simeon is then joined by Anna who thanks God that she has seen this moment "*and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem*" (Lk 2:38).

This Encounter celebrated the coming of the One for whom the Jews longed, the Messiah, and recognized that the Gentiles too would be enlightened through Him.

Our Celebration of This Feast

As might be expected, this feast originated in Jerusalem where the event it remembers took place. It likely began in the era of St Constantine the Great who sponsored the development of Jerusalem as a Christian site. Sermons on this Feast by the bishops Methodius of Patara (+ 312), Cyril of Jerusalem (+ 360), Gregory the Theologian (+ 389), Amphilokios of Iconium (+ 394), Gregory of Nyssa (+ 400), and John Chrysostom (+ 407) have come down to us**.**

Egeria, the Spanish nun who visited the Holy Land in 381-384, wrote about witnessing this feast: *"*The fortieth day after the Epiphany is undoubtedly celebrated here with the very highest honor, for on that day there is a procession, in which all take part, in the Anastasis, and all things are done in their order with the greatest joy, just as at Easter. All the priests, and after them the bishop, preach, always taking for their subject that part of the Gospel where Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple on the fortieth day, and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, saw Him, treating of the words which they spoke when they saw the Lord, and of that offering which His parents made. When everything that is customary has been done in order, the sacrament is celebrated, and the dismissal takes place."

The feast soon spread to Antioch and then, to Constantinople and the whole empire. It became particularly important in Constantinople in the sixth century when a plague threatened the city. After a solemn procession on this feast the plague ceased.

When this feast was instituted, the birth of Christ and His baptism at the Jordan were observed on the same day, January 6 (as the Armenian Church still does today). The Hypapante was then kept on February 14. When the separate feast of the Nativity on December 25 became common, the Hypapante was moved accordingly.

Light to the Gentiles

In the Western Church candles are blessed on this feast and a candlelight procession held in honor of the "Light to enlighten the Gentiles." This practice actually began in Jerusalem, as Egeria attests. When the feast was instituted in Constantinople the procession was introduced there as well. Today some Slavic Churches bless candles on this day but the procession has disappeared from this feast in the Byzantine Churches.

From a Homily of Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem (c. 636 AD)

In honor of the divine mystery that we celebrate today, let us all hasten to meet Christ. Everyone should be eager to join the procession and to carry a light.

Our lighted candles are a sign of the divine splendor of the One who comes to expel the dark shadows of evil and to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of His eternal light. Our candles also show how bright out souls should be when we go to meet Christ.

The Mother of God, the most pure Virgin, carried the True Light in her arms and brought Him to those who lay in darkness. We too should carry a light for all to see and reflect the radiance of the True Light as we hasten to meet Him.

The Light has come and has shone upon a world enveloped in shadows; the Dayspring from on high has visited us and given light to those who lived in darkness. This, then is our feast, and we join in procession with lighted candles to reveal the Light that has shone upon us and the glory that is yet to come to us through Him. So let us hasten all together to meet our God.

Let all of us, my brethren, be enlightened and made radiant by this Light. Let all of us share in its splendor, and be so filled with it that no one remains in the darkness.

March 9 – The Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste

UNTIL FAIRLY RECENTLY it was popular in Christian circles to identify oneself as a "soldier of Christ." There was biblical precedent for the image. St Paul, for instance, told Timothy that he "*…must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ*" (2 Tm 2:3). Catholics maintained various "knighthoods," recalling the Middle Ages. Protestants even devised a "paramilitary" church, the Salvation Army with its popular theme song, "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

While the Gospels offer negative images of soldiers whipping Christ and gambling for His clothes, they also show us soldiers in another light. We see soldiers listening to John the Baptist and asking him what they should do (see Lk 3:14). We hear of God-fearing soldiers, like the centurion in Capernaum who "*loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue*" (Lk 7:5). And the first fruit of the Gospel among the Gentiles was an officer of the Italian Regiment stationed in Caesarea, Cornelius the Centurion (see Acts 10).

Perhaps because armies do see more of the world than many other people, Christian soldiers grew in number, even during the time of the Roman persecutions. They were often targeted by their anti-Christian superiors and many were martyred. Military martyrs like St George and Ss. Sergius and Bacchos, who suffered in Asia Minor during the great persecutions at the beginning of the fourth century, became models for other Christian soldiers in the East who saw themselves as, first of all, in the army of the Lord.

The Thundering Legion

In AD 312 St Constantine the Great experienced his famous vision of the Cross. The next year, as Emperor of the West, he issued an edict of religious toleration, thus ending the persecution of Christians in his realm. Licinius, as Emperor of the East, signed on, but kept a wary eye on the Christians he ruled. Licinius knew that, if he were to fight Constantine, the Christians would side with their protector. As the struggle for universal control intensified, Licinius began ordering the extermination of Christians.

Licinius was particularly wary of Christians in the army. They refused to offer the usual sacrifices to the Roman gods and were considered a threat to the traditional Roman social customs. There were a number of Christians – soldiers included – near Sebaste in Asia Minor where the Twelfth or "Thundering" Legion was stationed to protect the eastern border of the empire. In 320, when Licinius ordered a major persecution of Christians, forty soldiers from this unit refused to take part.

We learn what happened next from St Basil the Great, who lived nearby, only a few years after the soldiers' ordeal. St Basil's mother, Emilia, had erected a chapel at Ennesi, the family estate, to house their relics and their story was part of the family lore. According to St Basil, the legion commander and the local governor each tried to convince the soldiers to comply with the orders they had received. They were unsuccessful. Threats, torture and imprisonment followed but the men remained firm. Finally the unit was condemned to a slow but certain death.

The soldiers were ordered to march naked onto a frozen pond during a particularly bitter winter night. A warm bath was set up nearby to tempt the men to recant. Ignoring the urging of their guards, the forty encouraged each other to remain firm and not give way: they were soldiers of Christ.

The Victors Revealed

Frostbite and hypothermia began taking their toll, when one of the soldiers gave in and recanted. Then, Basil reports, the most remarkable thing happened. One of the guards had a vision of

angels richly adorning the soldiers who had remained faithful to Christ. Overcome by the sight, he tore off his own clothes and joined his suffering comrades on the ice. St Ephrem the Syrian, commenting on the martyrs' ordeal, likened this guard to St Matthias replacing Judas in the company of the Apostles.

Some icons of these saints depict a woman seemingly helping one of the soldiers. St. Basil tells it this way. By morning most of the soldiers had succumbed to the bitter cold. The prefect ordered all the bodies to be taken away in wagons and be burned. One was found still alive and the guards set him aside, but, at a sign from him, his own mother hoisted him onto the cart alongside his dead comrades for their final journey.

Licinius' fears were well founded. In four years Constantine defeated him, taking control of the whole empire. He was imprisoned and later hanged by order of Constantine.

What remained of the martyr's relics were collected and enshrined at Emilia's chapel. Emilia's granddaughters gave a portion to the Bishop of Brescia in northern Italy who built a church in their honor. Relics were also sent to Constantinople as the fourth century historian Sozomen described.

The Forty Holy Martyrs are remembered for their steadfastness in trial. They came to be seen as personifying the words of Christ in the Gospel, "*He who shall endure to the end will be saved*" (Mt 24:13). Their endurance earned them remembrance in our liturgical services. In the mystery of Crowning bride and groom are blessed with these words: "Remember them, O Lord our God, as you remembered Your Holy Forty Martyrs, sending down upon them crowns from heaven." The martyrs' faithfulness to Christ was rewarded; the couple's fidelity can expect a like reward.

As models of endurance the Forty Martyrs are the only saints commemorated on a weekday during the Great Fast, encouraging us to endure whatever hardships we may experience in this season.

"O martyrs of Christ, you have made the holy Fast resplendent by your glorious deeds. Being forty in number, you hallowed the forty days of the Fast, imitating the redeeming Passion through your sufferings for Christ. Since you have boldness, intercede that we may celebrate in peace the third-day Resurrection of the God and Savior of our souls!"

Sticheron from Orthros

St Basil the Great on the Martyrs

"What trouble would you not take to find someone to pray for you to the Lord! Here are forty, praying with one voice. Where two or three are gathered together in the name of the Lord, there is He in the midst. Who doubts His presence in the midst of forty? …
"Let your supplications be made with the martyrs. Let the young men imitate their fellows. Let fathers pray to be fathers of sons such as these. Let mothers learn from a good mother. … She herself lifted him in her arms and placed him on the cart with the rest bound for the pyre: a veritable martyr's mother!

"O sacred troop! O glorious company! O invincible battalion! Flowers of the Church, yes, I repeat, human flowers! Stars that shine among the stars! Martyrs worthy of the praise of all the centuries! To you the doors of paradise were opened, and from the palaces of heaven the angels, prophets, patriarchs and all saints came out to witness your triumphal arrival. A sight worthy of the angelic army: forty warriors in the very flower of their youth who have disdained this life, who have loved the Lord above parents, children, wives and relatives. They disregarded this temporal life that they might glorify God in their members.…
"Having raised up the trophy of their victory against hell, each one received a crown from the hand of Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and dominion to the ages of ages."

From *Homily 19*

March 11 – St Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem

OUR LITURGICAL LIFE has been developed and enriched by a host of saints: men and women who have become our teachers in the spiritual life through the prayers and hymns which they composed. Not least among them is St Sophronios, seventh century Patriarch of Jerusalem (March 11). It is to him that we owe the Life of St Mary of Egypt, which we read on the fifth Thursday of the Great Fast, the Thursday of Repentance.

Born in Damascus in c. 560, Sophronios was trained in classical philosophy and was already lecturing in rhetoric by the time he was twenty. Like many classical philosophers before him, Sophronios chose to live an ascetic life in order to focus his life on the things of the mind. Unlike earlier philosophers, he was also a Christian and his asceticism inevitably led him to center his life on the things of the spirit. In search of spiritual wisdom he began visiting monasteries in Egypt, Syria and Palestine.

It was about the year 580 that Sophronios, still a layman, first met St John Moschos, a hieromonk at the monastery of Mar Saba. Sophronios quickly became disciple of the elder Moschos and they would be inseparable companions until Moschos' death some forty years later. It was to "His Beloved in Christ, Sophronios the Sophist" that the elder dedicated his most important work, *The Spiritual Meadow*.

The two came to adopt what has been called "a voluntary rootless existence" as their form of asceticism.in which they would be entirely dependent on the hospitality of others. Their choice was confirmed, as it were, by the political upheavals their age would endure.

Sophronios in Egypt

A palace revolution in 602 succeeded chiefly in destabilizing the Byzantine Empire. This weakened their ability to resist the encroachments of their chief rival, the Sassanid Persian Empire (Iran today). The Persians invaded and seized Syria and Palestine, routing the Byzantine army. Devotees of the Zoroastrian religion, the Persians destroyed churches and slaughtered

Christians in the territories they conquered. To the horror of the Byzantines the Sassanids seized the Holy Cross, taking it from Jerusalem back to Ctesiphon, their capital, in Mesopotamia.

In 605 Sophronios and John fled to Alexandria where they entered the service of the patriarch. In his life of St John the Almsgiver, Leontius of Neopolis tells that the two Syrians '… were really honest counselors and the patriarch gave unquestioning ear to them as though they were his fathers." They remained in Alexandria until the Sassanids continued their march across Palestine into Egypt.

While in Egypt St Sophronios contracted a serious inflammation of the eyes called ophthalmia, which often led to total blindness. He made a monastic profession and was tonsured by John Moschos. Then Sophronios went to visit the shrine of the Unmercenary Saints Cyrus and John and was cured. In gratitude he composed an encomium in praise of the saints recounting a number of miracles attributed to them. In English this work is generally called *The Seventy Miracles of Ss. Cyrus and John.*

In 616 the Persians reached Egypt and many Christians fled to the West. The patriarch took John and Sophronios with him to find refuge in Constantinople. When the patriarch died during the journey, our two saints continued on to Rome where John died in 619. Despite the Persian occupation of Palestine, Sophronios made sure that his elder's body was returned to the monastery where he had been tonsured, St Theodosius' near Bethlehem. Sophronios remained in that monastery.

Dogmatic and Other Writings

Controversies over the nature of Christ had been going on since the fifth century. Christians struggled to comprehend how the incarnate Christ could be fully God and fully man. In Egypt the majority of Egyptian monks had rejected the solution of the Council of Chalcedon (451) while the Greeks of the cities accepted it. Since John and Sophronios were working with the patriarch, they promoted the teachings of the council. As Leontius of Neapolis wrote, "setting their own wisdom against that of the mad followers of Severus and of the other unclean heretics who were scattered about the country; they delivered many villages, very many churches, and monasteries too, like good shepherds saving the sheep from the jaws of these evil beasts."

One attempt at theological compromise was Monothelitism which taught that in Christ there was but one will. Promoted by Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople with the blessing of the emperor as a way to reunify the Church in the empire, it began to spread through Syria and Egypt in 629.

St Sophronios wrote extensively against what he saw was a betrayal of Chalcedon, but none of his writings on this issue have survived. He returned to Alexandria to persuade Patriarch Cyrus to reject this doctrine. In 633 he made a similar trip to Constantinople but was unsuccessful in convincing either patriarch to reject monothelitism, This doctrine would be condemned finally at the Third Council of Constantinople in 681.

A few of his doctrinal works have survived, but his greatest contribution was in the area of liturgy. He composed an "Excursus on the Liturgy," the Life of St Mary of Egypt and also about

950 troparia and stikhera for the Paschal season. His Prayer for the Great Blessing of Water at Theophany and his three-ode Canons for the Great Fast are used in all Byzantine Churches to this day.

The Loss of Jerusalem

The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius had never given up on reclaiming the provinces he had lost to the Persians. He routed them from Syria and Palestine in 628 and pursued them to their capital to retrieve the Holy Cross. It is the return of the Cross to Jerusalem that we celebrate every year on September 14. By then Sophronios had been elected Patriarch of Jerusalem and it is he who is depicted elevating the Cross in our icons.

Christian Jerusalem would be short lived. Muhammad had wanted to capture Palestine and Syria for Islam but he realized Heraclius was too strong for him. After his death, his friend and successor, Caliph Umar ibn-al-Khattab, took on and quickly defeated the Persians. Then an Arab army besieged Jerusalem for two years until the Christians agreed to open the gates to them. Patriarch Sophronios insisted that he would only surrender the city to the caliph himself.

Umar ibn al-Khattab came to Jerusalem and toured the city with Sophronios. While they were touring the Anastasis, the Muslim call to prayer sounded. The patriarch invited Umar to pray inside the church but he declined, lest future Muslims use that as an excuse to claim it for a mosque. Sophronios acknowledges this courtesy by giving the keys of the church to him. The caliph in turn gave it to a family of Muslims from Medina and asked them to open the church and close it each day for the Christians. Their descendants still exercise this office at the Anastasis.

Within a few weeks, relations with the Arabs took a harder turn. Arab troops martyred some sixty Christian soldiers who refused to convert to Islam. A month later, in March of 638, Patriarch Sophronios reposed in Jerusalem; some accounts relate that his death was hastened by grief.

March 14 – St Benedict of Norcia

MEMBERS OF MANY RELIGIOUS GROUPS in the West have become concerned about the number of people divorcing themselves from the religions of their parents or grandparents. Some join other communities but most cease to identify with any religion at all. They identify themselves as "nones" – members of no religion.

A growing number of these "nones" come from minimally observant families who may attend church from time to time but whose religion has little impact in their lives. Their congregations may encourage this kind of minimal observance by functioning more as social clubs than as true faith communities.

Young people who are raised in such families and congregations are especially susceptible to the influences of the wider society, even when its values contradict traditional values drawn from the Scriptures. Modern life in the West is based on a radical individualism in which truth and

morality are completely subjective. When people define truth as "what works for me," they are not likely to submit themselves to any religious tradition.

In this country most people, even the poor, have more at their disposal than the elite of other ages and cultures. We do not feel the need to look to God for "our daily bread" when we have four TVs in the house. In these circumstances people whose only idea of prayer is begging God to meet their needs find they no longer need to beg and, that therefore, they no longer "need" God.

This situation has led some commentators to observe that churches which are just coasting along as social communities simply will not survive in a secular age. They feel that religious people need to construct communities in which they can live out their entire lives formed by their authentic faith and a Christian culture, rather than a media-driven and dysfunctional popular culture.

Some thinkers have found hope in the words of Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In his 1981 book *After Virtue*, he compared our age with the last day of the Western Roman Empire when old pagan values were being abandoned. He wrote that "A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing — was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness."

Based on MacIntyre's observation, a number of authors have called for Christians of all traditions to adopt what they call the "Benedict Option." Who is this Benedict and what is his option?

St Benedict of Norcia

The Benedict in question is the father of Western monasticism, St. Benedict of Norcia in southern Italy, whom our Church commemorates on March 14. Born in c. 480 to a noble family, he was educated in Rome when its culture was in decline. Over a century before, that city had been replaced as capital of the empire by Constantinople, the Christian "New Rome" built by St Constantine the Great. Old Rome remained a pagan city and its citizens led increasingly empty and dissolute lives.

As Pope St Gregory I described it, Benedict "was in the world and was free to enjoy the advantages which the world offers, but drew back his foot which he had, as it were, already set forth in the world… giving over his books, and forsaking his father's house and wealth, with a mind only to serve God, he sought for some place where he might attain to the desire of his holy purpose; and in this sort he departed [from Rome], instructed with learned ignorance and furnished with unlearned wisdom" (*Dialogues*, II).

Benedict, along with "a company of virtuous men," settled in a small town in the mountains above Rome to live in simplicity. He was tonsured as a monk by a monk from a nearby monastery and lived for three years as a hermit in a mountain cave. When the abbot of that

monastery died, the community asked Benedict to succeed him. Benedict went on to establish twelve monasteries in the area, but left to avoid controversy with a neighboring priest. He built a new monastery on the site of a ruined pagan temple at Monte Cassino, which still stands. Benedict spent the rest of his life forging a monastic rule, based on principles which St John Cassian had absorbed in Palestine and Egypt. Benedict envisioned monasticism essentially as living in community, working and praying together. Monasteries were to develop their own resources so as to be able to help those in need. Monks were to work for the support of the monasteries in any way which did not keep them from the daily services or distract them from their personal life of prayer.

The "Benedict Option"

As the Western empire further disintegrated with the incursions of barbarians, monasteries following St. Benedict's rule would become increasingly important as anchors of civilization and service to God in a world without them. As Cardinal Newman described that age, "Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing and building; and other silent men, not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, tiring their eyes and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully copied and recopied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one who contended or cried out, or drew attention to what was going on, but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning and a city."

Proponents of the Benedict Option hold that our age needs such anchors: monasteries or churches around which might gather fellowships of believers committed to forming their lives and work on the Gospel, making every other goal in life secondary to serving God. The Benedict Option calls Christians to live in communities centered on the prayer, worship, fellowship and service which characterize a fuller Christian life than is generally available in our world.

Many Christians, especially in the middle class, will find it extremely difficult to live a fuller life of faith. We live in a culture that expects family men and women to work so hard and so long that they have no time, or insufficient time, for religious life. Proponents of the Benedict Option are convinced that such a culture, devoted to materialism and the "better life," will only exterminate faith within its participants and their children.

Eastern Christian Churches are perhaps better equipped than their Western counterparts to become Benedict Option communities, provided that we use the resources already available to us. Parishes need to become the best expression of authentic Eastern Christianity they can be. Our churches need to nurture those disposed to a fuller Christian life through weekday services (vespers, compline, paraclisis, etc.) joined to simple fellowship meals and opportunities for learning and service. Periodic visits to monasteries or shrines support such a commitment. Partnering with other churches to celebrate the Great Feasts or major saints' days will enrich our own faith life and may draw others to share it. Sharing fellowship and prayer with other congregations, Eastern or Western, may help witness that a fuller Christian life is both possible and rewarding for those who choose to live it.

March 25 – Feast of the Holy Annunciation to the Theotokos

The Day God Took Flesh

ARCHBISHOP JOSEPH RAYA of blessed memory tells how, as a student, he visited his village priest during school breaks. On one visit he noted the Gospel book in the priest's icon corner opened to the story of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38). Returning on his next break a few months later, the young Joseph saw the Gospel opened to the same page. When Joseph asked the priest why he kept reading the same story, the priest answered that one could read this passage every day and never exhaust its meaning.

The Gospel passage tells of Gabriel's message from God to the Virgin Mary and her response, "Let it be so according to your word." With her acceptance, the eternal Word of God was conceived in her womb. It has been said that this event, the conception of Christ, even more than His birth changed the course of the planet. When the Word of God assumed human nature it was not at His birth but at His conception, when He took our nature in the form of a fetus in the womb of the Theotokos. His birth revealed the mystery of His incarnation to the world, but it was at His conception that this mystery was accomplished.

The Angel's Greeting

According to a tradition documented in the first centuries, "Luke, was born in Antioch, by profession, was a physician. He had become a disciple of the apostle Paul and later followed Paul until his [Paul's] martyrdom" (from a second-century prologue to the Gospel). He was thought to be either a Hellenized Jew or a converted pagan writing in Greek for a Greek-speaking community. This explains the Greek expression used by the angel in the Annunciation narrative, a phrase which has become part of the prayer life of Christians all over the world: "Hail, full of grace."

In the Gospel, the angel greets Mary with the Greek word *chaire* rather than with the Hebrew/ Aramaic salutation, *shalom*. While each of these expressions has a different literal meaning, both are idiomatic forms of greeting, expressing good will between people. Some translations use the literal meaning, *Rejoice*, while others use the idiomatic meaning, *Hail*.

The angel describes Mary in Lk 1:28 as *kecharitomeni*, another word which has proven difficult to translate. When St Jerome rendered the Bible into Latin he translated this term literally as *gratia plena*, *full of grace.* This would create a problem centuries later when Western theology began using *gratia* as a technical term to mean the holiness bestowed by God. They interpreted Gabriel's greeting as an indication that Mary was immaculately conceived.

During the Reformation, many Protestants rejected both this doctrine and St Jerome's translation, pointing to the angel Gabriel's own explanation of the term in v. 30: "*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor* [charis] *with God*." Modern Catholic translations of Luke generally favor this interpretation as well, rendering *kecharitomeni* as "highly favored one."

The Angel's Greeting in Prayer

One effect of the Council of Ephesus (431), which affirmed the Virgin Mary as Theotokos, was an increase of devotion to her. St Theodotos of Ancyra, a Father of that council, left us a praise of Mary based on Gabriel's greeting:
Hail, our desirable gladness;
Hail, O rejoicing of the churches;
Hail, O name that breathes out sweetness;
Hail, face that radiates divinity and grace;
Hail, most venerable memory;
Hail, O spiritual and saving fleece;
Hail, O Mother of unsetting splendor, filled with light;
Hail, unstained Mother of holiness;
Hail, most limpid font of the life-giving wave;
Hail, new Mother, workshop of the birth.
Hail, ineffable mother of a mystery beyond understanding;
Hail, new book of a new Scripture, of which, as Isaiah tells, angels and men are faithful witnesses;
Hail, alabaster jar of sanctifying ointment;
Hail, best trader of the coin of virginity;
Hail, creature embracing your Creator;
Hail, little container containing the Uncontainable (Homily 4:3).

Later poets would use the same literary device in composing Akathists to the Theotokos and, later, to numerous saints. It is also found in the Greek and Syriac hymns of Severus of Antioch (c. 459-538), Andrew of Crete (650-740), and John of Damascus (c. 675-749).

Appropriately enough, the same device is used in our services on the feast of the Annunciation. Several stichera at vespers are extended forms of the Mary-Gabriel dialogue in the Gospel, such as these:

"Gabriel stood before you, O Maiden, revealing the pre-eternal counsel, greeting you and exclaiming: 'Rejoice, O earth unsown! Rejoice, O bush unburnt! Rejoice, O depth hard to fathom! Rejoice, O bridge leading to the heavens and lofty ladder, which Jacob beheld! Rejoice, O divine jar of Manna! Rejoice, annulment of the curse! Rejoice, restoration of Adam: the Lord is with you!'"

"You appear to me as a man," the incorrupt Maiden said to the supreme commander; "yet how is it that you announce words which are beyond man? For you have said that God is with me, and that He will dwell in my womb. Tell me, how shall I become so spacious a dwelling and a place of sanctity which surpasses the cherubim? Deceive me no more with falsehood, for I have not known lust, I have not partaken of marriage, how then shall I give birth to a Child?"

The Angelic Salutation

The most popular prayer to the Theotokos based on Luke is undoubtedly the "Hail, Mary" which exists in different versions in the Greek, Latin and Syriac traditions. In each of these versions Gabriel's greeting (Lk 1:28) is joined to Elizabeth's greeting when she was visited by Mary after the Annunciation (Lk 1:42).

In Byzantine practice, the text is this: "Hail, O Theotokos, Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, for you have given birth to the Savior of our souls." This troparion is sung at vespers every day during the Great Fast and at other times during the year. It is also used by many people as part of their daily rule of prayer.

The oldest version in the West is that of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) who used the following text as the offertory chant on the Fourth Sunday in Advent: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." The second part of the prayer developed after the twelfth century and was fixed by Pope Pius V in 1568.

The only other tradition which uses this prayer is that of the Syriac Church which has a slightly different version in its book of the hours: "Hail Virgin Mary, full of grace, Our Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the Fruit of your womb, Our Lord. O Saint Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at all times, and at the hour of our death. Amen." It is often added to the concluding prayers of the daily office, particularly in India.

The Importance of the Annunciation

The meaning of this feast is well expressed in the hymns of vespers and orthros, such as this one sung at the aposticha of vespers.

Today is the joy of the annunciation, the triumph of virginity! Those below are united to those above! Adam is restored, and Eve is freed from her primal grief. The tabernacle of our nature, mingled with divinity, has become the temple of God! O the mystery! Incomprehensible is the image of His abasement, and ineffable the richness of His goodness! An angel serves the miracle, and the Virgin's womb receives the Son. The Holy Spirit is sent down from on high, and the Father is well pleased. The covenant is enacted by common consent. Saved thereby, let us cry out together with Gabriel to the Virgin: Rejoice, O joyous one, from whom Christ God, our salvation, is come, assuming our nature and elevating it in Himself! Entreat Him, that our souls be saved.

Annunciation: the First Feast?

Much has been written about dating the birth of Christ. In the twelfth century, the Syriac theologian Dionysius Bar-Salibi wrote that December 25 was established in the West as the feast of Christ's Nativity to coincide with the pagan Roman celebration of the Invincible Sun. This

concept became popular in the West, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More recent scholarship has shown that Christmas had been observed for years *before* Emperor Aurelian established the pagan festival in AD 274.

It was assumed that the date of the Annunciation was set in relation to the date of Christmas. Today it is recognized that the opposite was more likely the case. The ancient world put a great emphasis on *Coherence*: the underlying unity of related things. Already by AD 200 Christians were stressing that Christ suffered His passion on the same day that He was conceived. His coming and the purpose of His coming were facets of the same mystery.

Tertullian of Carthage taught that the 24th of the Hebrew month Nisan (the day of the crucifixion in the Gospel of John) was equivalent to March 25 in the Roman calendar. Approximately 200 years later, St Augustine of Hippo wrote in his treatise *On the Trinity* that Jesus "…is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also He suffered; so the womb of the Virgin in which He was conceived, where no mortal was begotten, corresponds to the new tomb in which He was buried, where no one was ever laid, neither before Him nor since."

Like so many aspects of traditional Christian practice, this notion of coherence is also reflected in Jewish thought. Rabbis in the second century AD are recorded as teaching that the month of Nisan was the time of God's decisive interventions in the world. "In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the patriarchs were born; on Passover Isaac was born… and in Nisan they will be redeemed in time to come." Their teaching that creation and redemption should occur at the same time of year would certainly resound with St Athanasius who wrote, "The renewal of creation has been wrought by the self-same Word who made it in the beginning" (*On the Incarnation*, 1).

Thus early Christians and their Jewish contemporaries used the calendar to express a spiritual teaching: the unity of God's plan for the human race. God does not work in our chronological time. There are no calendars in heaven. God's work is one; He creates and renews and refreshes His creation in one eternal act, in what we might call "really real" time. In stressing the unity of Christ's Incarnation and His passion these Christian thinkers were proclaiming the oneness of God's plan for our salvation.

While the rabbis looked for redemption yet to come, Christians saw that it was effected in the Incarnation of the eternal Word. "What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His image in mankind so that through it we might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own person because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, who could recreate man after the Image" (St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 13).

Two Contemporary Developments

The mystery we celebrate on March 25 has been recognized as an important milestone for two very different groups of people. Many pro-life parents throughout the world have begun to celebrate their children's *First Days*, nine months before their birthdays. In this they are rejecting the secular culture's contention that a fetus is a "part" of the mother which only "becomes human" later in its development.

Christian pro-lifers accordingly keep the Feast of the Annunciation as the *First Day* of the Incarnate Word. They encourage its observance as a sign that the Christian community recognize and honor the conception and prenatal life of the Lord. If believers do not celebrate the conception of One who was foretold and announced by an angel, they reason, why should the world esteem the coming of its unwanted children?

In 1998 Argentina became the first nation to commemorate March 25 as the *Day of the Unborn Child*. Since then many other countries with a Hispanic culture (e.g. Central and South America, the Philippines) have done the same. In Spain the day was given a wider focus. Their *International Day for Life* encourages recognition of the dangers of euthanasia, embryo experimentation and other challenges to the sanctity of life. In the United States groups including the American Life League, the Knights of Columbus and Priests for Life have prompted observance and public recognition of this day.

In 2010 Christians and Muslims in Lebanon responded to the hostilities between these groups in other countries by joining forces to declare March 25 a national holiday celebrating the place of the Virgin Mary in Christianity and in Islam. The initiative for this *Islamic-Christian Day* came from a Sunni Sheikh, Mohammed Nokkari, and an inter-faith group centered in the College of Notre Dame in Jamhour, near Beirut. Their annual gathering on the Annunciation, "Together Around Our Lady Mary," led to civic recognition on the national and local level. In Beirut the plaza in front of the National Museum has been designated the "place de Marie," featuring a stylized sculpture of the Virgin surrounded by a crescent, the international symbol of Islam.

The Virgin Mary is mentioned 36 times in the Koran which teaches that the Lord Jesus was born of a Virgin, whom they call "our Lady Mary," preferred by God above all the women in creation.

April 23 – St George the Great Martyr and Trophy-Bearer

Soldier of the Great King

"LARGER THAN LIFE" is a fitting description for this saint who has become the patron of so many nations and peoples. George the Great-Martyr and Trophybearer (c.280-303) was born to a prominent Greek Christian family in Palestine. His father was a military official from Cappadocia and his mother from Lod (Lydda). When George's father died, mother and son went back to Lod where he was raised.

The young George aimed at a military career like his father and at the age of seventeen went to Nicomedia, the imperial capital in Asia Minor, to present himself for the emperor's service. Emperor Diocletian had known George's father and welcomed him into the Roman army. By his late 20s George held the rank of tribune and served in the imperial guard.

The Persecution of Diocletian

In AD 293 Diocletian had instituted a "tetrarchy," entrusting the rule of the Roman Empire to four leaders: two emperors (Diocletian and Maximian) and two Caesars (Galerius and Constantius) as part of his program to revitalize the empire. His plan also involved restoring temples and cults of the ancient gods as a way of instilling "Roman pride." Christians supported the empire but resisted its identification with the gods and goddesses of antiquity.

Christian historians have long described the events of 302-311 as the "persecution of Diocletian," but in fact it was instigated by Galerius. His mother, a pagan priestess, loathed the Christians for avoiding her festivals and passed on those sentiments to her son. He instituted the persecution of Christians in the territory he ruled and urged the same throughout the empire.

In the previous forty years Christians had become increasingly influential in public life and in the military. Under the tetrarchy, however, Christians were increasingly blamed for the failure of the ancient gods to answer the prayers of their devotees. In 299, for example at the end of a war with Persia, Diocletian and Valerius had stopped at Antioch and were consulting oracles there to determine their future course. The diviners blamed the presence of Christians in the imperial retinue for their own failure to interpret the future.

In the year 302, Diocletian was again at Antioch. A sacrifice was being offered in the palace when a Christian deacon interrupted and publicly denounced it. When a few months later fire broke out in the imperial palace at Nicomedia Galerius convinced Diocletian that it was a revolt of some Christians on his staff. The result was described by the fourth century historian, Eusebius:

"It was the nineteenth year of Diocletian's reign [AD 303] and the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, and the festival of the Savior's Passion was approaching, when an imperial decree was published everywhere, ordering the churches to be razed to the ground and the Scriptures destroyed by fire, and giving notice that those in places of honor would lose their places, and domestic staff, if they continued to profess Christianity, would be deprived of their liberty. Such was the first edict against us. Soon afterwards other decrees arrived in rapid succession, ordering that the presidents of the churches in every place should all be first committed to prison and then coerced by every possible means into offering sacrifice" (Eusebius, *History of the Church,* VIII.2).

The Martyrdom of St George

George stood up for his faith. He resisted the bribes Diocletian offered if he were to worship the Roman gods, and remained firm when those bribes turned to threats. Condemned to death, George gave away his belongings to the poor and submitted to torture. Later writers described all

manner of tortures said to have been inflicted on St. George. Perhaps the most astute judgment on those writings is that of Pope Gelasius I who stated that George was among those saints "whose names are justly reverenced among men, but whose actions are known only to God" (*De Libris recipiendis*, 494).

George was beheaded outside the walls of Nicomedia on April 23, 303. His body was returned to Lod where Christians began to revere him as a martyr. In the time of Constantine the Great, a church was built over the Saint's grave. There has been a shrine at this site from the fourth century until the present day.

Another Palestinian shrine to St George, at Beit Jala, is frequented by numerous Pilgrims – Muslims as well as Christians. An Orthodox church, it nevertheless found a place in Taufiq Canaan's *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine.* It may be that, while many Palestinians were willing to accept Islam during the Arab and Egyptian invasions, they were not willing to give up St. George.

Persecution Ends in 311

George's apparent defeat at the hand of Diocletian was actually a victory over him and, by extension, over all evil. For this reason St George is called "the Trophy-bearer." That victory would soon become widespread in the Roman world.

In AD 311, Galerius ended the Great Persecution which he had instigated in 303. Having contracted a particularly loathsome disease, he sought to appease the Christian God. Both Lactantius (XXXIV) and Eusebius record this Edict of Toleration:

"Among the other steps that we are taking for the advantage and benefit of the nation, we have desired hitherto that every deficiency should be made good, in accordance with the established law and public order of Rome; and we made provision for this – that the Christians who had abandoned the convictions of their own forefathers should return to sound ideas. For through some perverse reasoning such arrogance and folly had seized and possessed them that they refused to follow the path trodden by earlier generations (and perhaps blazed long ago by their own ancestors), and made their own laws to suit their own ideas and individual tastes and observed these; and held various meetings in various places.

"Consequently, when we issued an order to the effect that they were to go back to the practices established by the ancients, many of them found themselves in great danger, and many were proceeded against and punished with death in many forms. Most of them indeed persisted in the same folly, and we saw that they were neither paying to the gods in heaven the worship that is their due nor giving any honor to the god of the Christians. So in view of our benevolence and the established custom by which we invariably grant pardon to all men, we have thought proper in this matter also to extend our clemency most gladly, so that Christians may again exist and rebuild the houses in which they used to meet, on condition that they do nothing contrary to public order.... Therefore, in view of this our clemency, they are in duty bound to beseech their own god for our security, and that of the state and of themselves, in order that in every way the

state may be preserved in health and they may be able to live free from anxiety in their own homes."

After eight years of persecution, Christians again were permitted to build their churches, if only they would pray for the recovery of the dying emperor.

In the Fulness of Time (Gal 3:23-4:5)

In this passage St Paul uses a term that begs an explanation. "*But when **the fullness of the time** had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law…*" (Gal 4:4). What is "*the fullness of the time*"? How are we to understand it?

This idea – the fullness of time – was not devised by St. Paul. The Lord Jesus had used it to describe His presence in the world. "*Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, '**The time is fulfilled**, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel*'" (Mk 1:15).

Time vs. Time

The first step in understanding these terms is to realize that, while our English translations use the same word in both passages, these Scriptures actually employ two different words meaning time. The Gospel phrase is "the *kairos* is fulfilled" while St Paul writes of the "*pleroma* of the *chronos*." In Greek, the word *chronos* refers to chronological time: the days, hours and minutes by which we measure our earthly reality.

Kairos, on the other hand, has a different meaning in Greek. It refers to the right or opportune moment, a significant time for an action or a decision. Some translations of Scripture render the word *kairos* as "the appointed time in the purpose of God." The same word is used at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy when the deacon says to the priest, "It is the time [*kairos*] for us to work for the Lord." He does not mean, "It's 10 AM, we'd better start" but "the moment has come for us" to fulfill our role as God's priestly people.

While St Paul uses the term *chronos*, he uses it in a way that means a time fraught with meaning, in other words, like *kairos*. He speaks of the *pleroma* (fullness) of *chronos*. The word *pleroma* does not mean "full" as a quantity, but as a quality (completeness or perfection). We also use this word in our Liturgy when, after the Great Entrance, the deacon says, "Let us complete our prayer to the Lord. This does not mean, "Let's finish up" but "Let us make our prayer complete or perfect" through the offering of the gifts we have brought forth.

Both terms "*kairos*" and "fullness of *chronos*" thus mean the same thing – it is the right time, the perfected time for God's plan in the world to be accomplished.

What Makes This the Opportune Time?

Students of the Scriptures have long reflected on why the First Century of our era was the "right time" for the Incarnation of Christ to bring about our salvation. Many of them note that on a secular level:

- Politically, the Roman Empire controlled the Mediterranean world and the civilized areas bordering it. The possibility of safe travel and improved communications brought peoples of the area closer together than ever before. Men from outlying areas were often conscripted, spreading the Roman worldview even beyond the Mediterranean. This also accounts for the number of soldiers, like St George, among the early martyrs.
- Culturally, the influence of Greek philosophy and literature provided a more unified world view. The Greek language became the dominant language for trade over a large area, enabling communication with a wide range of peoples.
- Religiously, belief in the numerous Greek and Roman gods and goddesses offered only local, familial and personal protection. Mystery religions emphasized sacrifices, often bloody, to attain blessings. The philosophically-minded disdained all these religions. The result was a religious void, such as St Paul encountered in Athens (see Acts 17: 16-33). To many the appeal of a universal monotheism was strong, even leading some to become proselytes, converts to Judaism, or at least sympathizers with their belief in only one God.

In the Jewish world, the time was ripe as well. Many, resenting all foreign rule, were waiting for the Messiah's immanent appearance to restore their independence. Others, like the Pharisees, were longing for a Messiah who would restore a purer observance of the Torah.

Jews of all types looked to the Old Testament for prophecies or indications of the coming Messiah, "*searching what, or what manner of time* [kairos]*, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you… things which angels desire to look into*" (1 Pt 1:10-12). The first Christians, the apostolic community, saw these signs as pointing to the Lord Jesus. The time of Christ was the *kairos* for the fulfillment of God's plan.

The Ultimate Fullness of Time

In Eph 1 St Paul expands his understanding of the fullness of time to include the ultimate union of all creation in Christ. "*In Him* [Christ] *we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself… that in the dispensation of the fullness of time He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him*" (Eph 1: 7, 9, 10). Here St Paul describes the divine economy in superlatives - the *pliromatos* of the *kairon* – in order to point to its ultimate completion, the "absolute fulfillment of super-time," when Christ will be all in all.

On the Fullness of Time

For St John Chrysostom the first century was not a time of increasing peace and unity, but of decline.

"The *fullness of time* was the Son's appearing. Then, when God had done all things through angels, prophets and the Law yet nothing had improved, there was a danger that humanity had come into being for nothing. It was not going merely nowhere, but to the bad. All were perishing together, just like in the days of the flood but more so. Just then He offered this gracious dispensation in order to insure that creation had not come into being for nothing or in vain. The fullness of time is that divine wisdom by which, at the moment when all were most likely to perish, they were saved" (St John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians* 1.1.10).

April 25 – Holy Apostle and Evangelist Mark

Herald of Heavenly Mysteries

SINCE THE SECOND CENTURY Christians have been accustomed to identify the second of our four Gospels by the name of its author, Mark the Evangelist. The Gospel itself, however, never identifies its author by name or gives us any clue to the author's identity. What, then, is the source of this identification with Mark and what do we know about him?

It is the early second-century bishop of Hieropolis in Asia Minor, Papias, who identified the Gospel writers in his work, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*. St Irenaeus of Lyons (+ c.202) tell us that Papias had ties to earlier Christian leaders going back to the first century. Papias was a companion of Irenaeus' own mentor, St Polycarp of Smyrna, and in his youth had been a disciple of St John the Presbyter of Ephesus, who was himself a disciple of Christ. No copy of Papias' own work has survived but he is quoted by the fourth-century Church historian, Eusebius.

According to Papias, Mark "neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him," but relied on the testimony of St. Peter which he recorded. Papias tells us that John the Presbyter used to say that Mark would write down accurately as many of Peter's anecdotes as he recalled from memory and set them out in an orderly form. According to tradition this happened at the request of Christians in Rome who had heard Peter's preaching. Later authors point to the place which St. Peter has in Mark as evidence that this Gospel records the ministry of Christ as seen by Peter.

Who Was St Mark?

It is difficult to determine the story of St Mark. One thread connects him with St Paul in Asia Minor; a second thread finds him accompanying St Peter in Rome; a third thread places him in Alexandria, bringing the Gospel there.

In his Epistle to the Colossians, written from prison probably in Rome, St Paul mentions one of his Jewish fellow-workers, "*Mark, the cousin of Barnabas*." (Col 4:10). Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew, one of the first converts to Christ in Jerusalem, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles: "*And Joses who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet"* (Acts 4:36-37)**.** Barnabas became a trusted leader in the Jerusalem Church and it was he whom the apostles sent to Antioch to investigate the rumor that Gentiles there had accepted Christ. Barnabas spent an entire year there in Antioch in the company of St. Paul (see Acts 11:19-26).

When the Christians at Antioch learned of an impending famine in Judea, they "...*determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul*" (Acts 11: 29-30). And this is when Mark becomes a companion of his cousin Barnabas. When their mission in Jerusalem ended, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch; "*... they also took with them John, whose surname was Mark*" (Acts 12:25).

Barnabas and Paul travelled together, preaching Christ in Cyprus and Asia Minor. For a time Mark went with them, but left them during their journey. This became such a sore point for St Paul that it caused a rupture between him and Barnabas as they were preparing for another missionary journey. "*Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus but Paul chose Silas and departed*…" (Acts 15: 37-40).

We don't know why Mark left the others in Pamphylia – perhaps he was still a little young for the kind of commitment that Paul and Barnabas were ready to make. In any event Mark was once more in Paul's good graces when his Second Epistle to Timothy was written. There he says, "*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry*" (2 Tm 4:11).

Rome and Alexandria

It is thought that St Paul wrote this epistle while a prisoner in Rome. If Mark joined him there, he may have heard Peter's preaching at that time. He became so attached to that apostle that Peter ends his First Epistle with this farewell, "*She who is in Babylon* [i.e. Rome], *elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son*" (1 Pt 5:13).

At some point people asked Mark to record Peter's reminiscences and he began to do so while St Peter was still alive. According to Eusebius, Mark "distributed the Gospel among those that asked him," suggesting that he had completed the Gospel while in Rome.

A recently rediscovered letter from St Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) to a certain Theodore gives a slightly different picture, attesting that the Gospel was completed in Alexandria. "As for

Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome he wrote an account of the Lord's doings, not, however, declaring all of them, nor yet hinting at the private ones, but selecting what he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed. But when Peter died a martyr, Mark came over to Alexandria, bringing both his own notes and those of Peter, from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress toward knowledge. Thus he composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected."

This letter gives new weight to the tradition held by the Copts and the Greeks of Alexandria that St Mark founded the Church in that city. He is said to have died there on Pascha in AD 68 when devotees of the Egyptian god Serapis rioted against the Christians.

The Relics of St Mark

In the year 828 the body of St Mark, long kept in Alexandria, was smuggled out of the city by Venetian merchants and taken to their city, ostensibly to save it from destruction by Muslims. As Venetians tell it, the body of Saint Mark was taken out of its sarcophagus and unwrapped from its silk shroud and replaced by another. It was then placed in a chest and taken on board the Venetian ship, the merchants first ensuring that the saint's remains were covered by a layer of pork and cabbage. When the Muslim officials opened the chest to inspect it, they cried out '*Kanzir, kanzir*' (Pigs! Pigs!) at the sight and smell of the pork and left it untouched. St Mark's body remains in Venice's Basilica of St Mark, to this day.

On June 22, 1968 Pope Paul VI returned a portion of these relics to a delegation of Coptic Orthodox bishops. Two days later they flew to Egypt where the relics were met by Pope Kyrillos VI and thousands of faithful. They were enshrined beneath the holy table in the new Cathedral of St Mark in Cairo, the largest church in Africa.

From your childhood the light of truth enlightened you, O Mark, and you loved the labor of Christ the Savior. Therefore, you followed Peter with zeal and served Paul well as a fellow laborer, and you enlighten the world with your holy Gospel.

Troparion

April 30 – St James, the Son of Zebedee

THE GOSPELS ARE UNANIMOUS in telling us that, out of His twelve chief disciples, the Lord Jesus had a special relationship with Peter, James and John. Along with Andrew, Peter's brother, they were the first called of the twelve. After calling Peter and Andrew to follow Him, Jesus invited James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee, to do so as well. Jesus then visited the synagogue in Capernaum and He went to the house of Simon (Peter) and Andrew, taking James and John along with Him (see Mark 1:29-31).

The Gospels record that Jesus singled out Peter, James and John, making them His closest associates and favored companions. When the Lord was called to the house of Jairus, who feared for his daughter's life, "*He permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James*" (Mk 5:37).

It was these same three disciples who witnessed the Lord's transfiguration on the mountain and who were closest to Him at the end of His ministry. "*Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled*?"(Mk 13:3, 4) It was the same three who followed Him into the Garden after the Last Supper. "*Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' And He took Peter, James, and John with Him*…" (Mk 14:32, 33).

The Death of James

A few years after the death and resurrection of Christ, there was "*a great famine throughout all the world, which happened in the days of Claudius Caesar*" (Acts 11:28) who reigned from AD 41 to 54. This famine is mentioned by a number of contemporary writers, both Jewish and pagan, such as Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius, who described the famine as "the result of bad harvests that occurred during a span of several years" (*Lives of the Caesars*, 18).

"*Now about that time* [the time of the famine] *Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also*" (Acts 12:1-3). James was thus the first of Christ's closest followers to die; Peter was freed from prison, however (see Acts 12:5-11), and went on to strengthen the Churches springing up throughout the Roman Empire.

St Clement of Alexandria, who lived in Jerusalem at the end of the second century, recorded an otherwise unknown anecdote concerning the death of St James. Eusebius included it in his History of the Church. "Concerning this James, Clement, in the seventh book of his *Hypotyposes*, relates a story which is worthy of mention; telling it as he received it from those who had lived before him. He says that the one who led James to the judgment-seat, when he saw him bearing his testimony, was moved, and confessed that he was himself also a Christian.

'They were both therefore, he says, led away together; and on the way, he begged James to forgive him. And he, after considering a little, said, Peace be with you, and kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time" (*History of the Church*, Book II, 9).

The head of St James is reputedly buried in Jerusalem's Armenian cathedral, which is dedicated to St James the brother of John and also to St James the Just, the Brother of the Lord. In one of its chapels, built in the fifth century, a red marble slab in front of the altar marks the place where St James' head is buried, on the supposed site of his beheading.

St James in Spain?

According to the tradition of the early Church, St James died without leaving Jerusalem (cf. *Clement of Alexandria*, Stromata *VI*; Apollonius, quoted by Eusebius, Church History *VI.18*).

Nonetheless, there is a highly revered tradition in the West that St James had brought the Gospel to Spain and then returned to Jerusalem where he died.

According to this tradition, sometime after Pentecost, Saint Peter cast lots with the Apostles to determine the portions of the world to which each Apostle would bring the Gospel. James was chosen to travel to Iberia. No certain mention of such a tradition is to be found in any early writings nor in the early councils; the first certain mention we find is in a ninth century martyrology by the Swiss Benedictine monk, Notker of St. Gall.

According to another Spanish tradition, on January 2 in AD 40, the Mother of God appeared to St James standing on a column on the bank of the Ebro River, instructing him to build a church there in her honor. This pillar is venerated today in the present Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar, in Zaragoza, central Spain.

Even more revered in Spain is the shrine of Santiago (St James) de Compostela in Spanish Galicia, reputed to be the resting place of St James' body. According to a tradition recorded in the 12th century Codex Calixtinus, St James' disciples were able to claim his body after his beheading. It was then supposedly transported miraculously to Galicia where it was buried in Compostela.

It is said that these relics were unearthed in the ninth century by a hermit and they became the focal point of an annual pilgrimage to Compostela, called the Way of St James, which has been held ever since.

In 1879 the saint's supposed remains at Compostela were unearthed again and in 1884 Pope Leo XIII issued a bull, *Omnipotens Deus*, declaring "in perpetuum" that these were indeed the remains of St James and his two companions, Athanasius and Theodorus. There is no historical documentation to support this assertion.

Vespers for St James (April 30)

At Lord to You I Call

You drew men up from the depths of vanity with a fisherman's rod of grace. You obeyed the commands of the Teacher, O worthy James, who enlightened all your thoughts and revealed you as an Apostle and holy preacher, for you expound His incomprehensible divinity, O most blessed one.

The illumination of the Spirit descended on you in the form of fire and made you a divine vessel, O blessed one, dispelling with power the darkness of godlessness and enlightening the world with the brightness of your all-wise words, O preacher of mysteries, O leader of the Apostles, James, the eye-witness of Christ.

You illumined those lying in the darkness of ignorance with the lightning flash of your preaching, O glorious James. You revealed them to be sons through faith of the Master and God

whose passion and death you imitated with zeal. You became an heir of glory, O wise one, as one speaking from God, and a most faithful disciple.

Come, let us praise James with hymns of psalms: the preacher of heavenly mysteries and expounder of the Gospel; for he was revealed as a river of the mystical Paradise, watering spiritual furrows with heavenly streams, revealing them to bear fruit to Christ God, who, by his prayers, grants cleansing, enlightenment, and great mercy.

May 8 – The Holy Apostle John the Theologian

IN THE BYZANTINE CHURCHES the Gospel according to John in read daily at the Divine Liturgy from Pascha to Pentecost. John has been called the most fully Paschal Gospel in the New Testament because the themes which it highlights are especially apropos of the mysteries celebrated in these days. Some of these themes are:

The Paschal Lamb –The image of Christ as the Lamb initially appears when Christ first approaches the Jordan: "*John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*'" (Jn 1:29). This image, evoking both the scapegoat who symbolically takes away sin at Yom Kippur as well as the Passover lamb, reappears in John's narrative of the passion. There it is Pilate who points to Christ and reveals His true identity: "*Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!*'" (Jn 19:14).

John reinforces this image, placing the time of Christ's condemnation and crucifixion at the same hour in which the paschal lambs would be sacrificed. Many events in this Gospel are described in the context of the Jewish liturgical cycle.

Water and Life in the Spirit – This theme also appears near the beginning of John. In Jn 3 Jesus astonishes Nicodemus with this assertion, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*" (v. 5). The Churches in both East and West under-stand baptism as this new birth, required for entry into the Church.

The connection between water and spiritual life is also mentioned during the Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman: "… *the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life*" (Jn 4:14). The water here does not simply admit a person into the Christian community but into eternal life.

Finally, this living water is identified with the Holy Spirit Himself: The Lord said, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified*" (Jn 7:37-39). Jesus' glorification – His death and resurrection – would be the occasion for the sending of the Spirit, the focus of our Pentecost feast.

The Resurrection and the Life – The event of Christ's resurrection is found in all four Gospels. John, however, emphasizes Christ as our life and resurrection with the story of Lazarus whom Christ raised before entering Jerusalem (Jn 11). In that passage Christ is depicted as telling Lazarus' sister, Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die*" (v. 25). The defeat of death comes through faith in Christ.

The New Creation – Unlike the other canonical Gospels, John begins at the very beginning, with the creation. The first words of Jn 1:1 are the same as the first words in Gen 1:1, reinforcing the apostle's teaching that "*All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made*" (v. 3).

In his book *The Holy Gospel, a Byzantine Perspective* Fr. John Custer suggests that John also subtly implies that all things are recreated in Christ. John frequently specifies when certain events took place (next day, after two days…, etc.) This is especially evident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry which is described in the format of seven days, again recalling the story of creation in Genesis. Thus in:
Day 1 - Jewish leaders question John the Baptist (Jn 1:19)
Day 2 – "*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*!" (Jn 1:29)
Day 3 - "*Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God*!" (Jn 1:35, 36)
Day 4 – "*The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip*…" (Jn 1:43)
Day 7 – "*On the third day* [after that] *there was a wedding in Cana*…" (Jn 2:1). The seventh day ends with "*…and His disciples believed in Him*" (Jn 2:11). This "seventh day" is blessed by the foundation of the Church.

Christ in the Gospel of John

The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) portray the identity of Christ as Messiah and Son of God as perceived only gradually by His closest followers and hidden from people in general. John, the last Gospel written, reveals how the first-century Church's view of Jesus had developed. Its first verses depict Christ as the eternal Word of God (the Logos), through whom all creation was made, to be incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory*…" (Jn 1:14). Titles like Son of David could be applied to a prophet; only a divinity could be called Logos.

Other expressions in John which describe Jesus as more than a man are the Bread from heaven (see Jn 6 22-60), the Light (Jn 1:9), the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-16), and the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6). In John Jesus affirms His unity with the Father – "*I and the Father are one*" (Jn 10:30) – and the reality of His union with us: "*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit*" (Jn 15.5). This Gospel thus witnesses to the faith of the first-century Church to the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

What Do We Know about John?

All the Gospels describe the apostle John as a son of Zebedee, as a brother of James and as one of Jesus' closest companions. There is little further personal information about him in the Scriptures. How, then do we know that John wrote this Gospel?

After describing a scene involving Jesus, Peter and John we are told about John that: "*This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true*" (Jn 21:24). This editor or scribe thus affirms John as the author of the reminiscences recorded in the Gospel. The earliest testimonies, from the second century, attributes the Gospel to "John, one of the apostles of Christ" (St Justin the Philosopher, *Dialogue with Trypho*) and "a disciple of the Lord" (St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*). While many have challenged this attribution, no one has convincingly disproved it.

Because of the theological depth of this Gospel St John has come to be known as "the Theologian," referring to his personal experience of the vision of God reflected in his writings.

The scribe is traditionally identified as Prochoros, one of the first seven deacons, who became John's companion in Ephesus and accompanied him in his exile to the island of Patmos. He is thought to have recorded John's memoirs (the Gospel) and the Book of Revelation.

May 8 – Feast of St John the Theologian

St John's repose is commemorated in the Byzantine Churches on September 26. He was buried near Ephesus and for about 1000 years, pilgrims would visit this grave on May 8 when a fine ash dust, which believers called "manna," would rise from the site. The sick to which it was applied were healed. A feast of St John is still kept on this date as a result. In the sixth century a large basilica was built over his grave. The shrine became a mosque in 1330 and was razed by Tamerlane's Mongol army in 1402.

May 9 – The Holy Prophet Isaiah

More Evangelist than Prophet

OF ALL THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS quoted in the New Testament, the most frequently cited is Isaiah, who is remembered on our Church's calendar on May 9. Isaiah's prophecies are referenced 66 times in the New Testament; only the Psalms are more frequently quoted.

Isaiah lived in the eighth century BC, a time of great political upheaval in the Holy Land. The Assyrian Empire was poised to engulf the northern kingdom, Israel, (which it would succeed in doing) and threatened the southern kingdom, Judah, as well. While the rulers' response was to seek military alliances with neighboring pagan kingdoms, Isaiah's response was decidedly apolitical: only faithfulness to God and His way would save His people.

Isaiah insisted that the Jews reject the idolatry of their pagan neighbors rather than flirt with it for political ends. He preached the need for rediscovering justice and charity as the distinctive signs of God's people at a time when the godly way of life was being forgotten. Otherwise God would use His people's enemies to chastise them for their infidelities.

While some modern scholars suggest otherwise, ancient authors claim that Isaiah prophesied for over sixty years and died in the reign of Manasseh. *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, a first-century AD Jewish work, reflects the tradition that Isaiah was killed by order of Manasseh. Manasseh would later repent and author the prayer which bears his name.

The Call of Isaiah

Isaiah describes the religious experience which launched his prophetic activity: "*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!' And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.'*

"Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged"" (Is 6:1-7).

Isaiah's vision has become an icon of our liturgical experience of the glory of God. We depict the six-winged seraphim hovering over the throne of God on the ripidia which are poised over our churches' holy tables. We quote their description ("*with two he covered…*") in our Liturgy of St. Basil. In every Liturgy of East and West the angels' cry ("Holy, holy, holy…") introduces the anaphora, its central prayer. Finally, the live coal from the altar has become an image of the Eucharist which touches our lips, takes away our iniquities and purges our sins.

Isaiah's Messianic Prophecies

Isaiah foretold the coming of a Messiah who would deliver God's people from their oppressors. In Isaiah 45 this Anointed/ Messiah is identified as Cyrus the Great, the Persian monarch who defeated the Babylonians in the sixth century BC and allowed the Jews to return to the Holy Land and rebuild Jerusalem. "*Thus says the LORD to His Anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held… 'I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build My city And let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward,' says the LORD of hosts*" (Isaiah 45:13).

Nevertheless, Jewish scholars came to see that this prophecy would reach its ultimate fulfillment in Another who was to come in the future. The first Christians recognized that Jesus was the long-awaited One who fulfilled these prophecies:

"*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel*" (Is 7:14).

"*The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali… the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of th e shadow of death, upon them a light has shined*" (Is 9:1, 2).

"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him…" (Is 11:1, 2).

"*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever*" (Is 9:6, 7).

"*And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious*" (Is 11:10).

"*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'*" (Is 40:3).

"*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound*…" (Is 61:1).

The Suffering Servant

Perhaps the first prophecies of Isaiah to resonate among the followers of Jesus were the following which Jewish texts like the Babylonian Talmud attributed to a Messiah who conquered through suffering: *"I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting"* (Is 50:6).

"*He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed… He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth*" (Is 53:2-5, 7).

Most rabbis today see these prophecies as describing the suffering people of Israel.

St Jerome (c. 342–420) expressed the thought of many Christian commentators since when he said, "[Isaiah] was more of an Evangelist than a Prophet, because he described all of the Mysteries of the Church of Christ so vividly that you would assume he was not prophesying about the future, but rather was composing a history of past events."

May 21 – Ss. Constantine and Helen, Equals to the Apostles

Enlighteners of the Ecumene

THE CHURCH HAS USED MANY TERMS to describe the saints. Some of these are common to all the historic Churches, such as apostles or martyrs. The Eastern Churches also speak of some saints

as “Equal to the Apostles,” believers who were responsible for bringing the Gospel to significant groups of people or nations throughout the world. The first of them were St Mary Magdalene, who announced the Resurrection to the dispirited followers of Jesus, and St Thecla, the first woman martyr.

The Church has called Equal to the Apostles those who have been responsible for bringing the Gospel to previously pagan territories, such as Ss Cyril and Methodius and St Clement of Ochrid, who evangelized the Slavs of Moravia and Macedonia during the ninth century. An unlikely evangelist given this title is St Nino, the enlightener of Georgia. The Roman historian Tyrranius Rufinus (c345-410) recounts her story as told him by a Georgian prince. Nino, taken captive during the early fourth century, came to the attention of the queen when a sick child was healed by her prayers. She eventually brought the queen and then the king to Christ. Mass conversions followed.

Among the Equals to the Apostles honored in the Eastern Churches are those rulers who first established or championed the Church in their realms. Chief among them are Ss Constantine and Helena whose feast is observed on May 21.

The Conversion of Constantine

Son of a pagan father and a mother perhaps already sympathetic to Christianity (Helena), Constantine followed a military career like his father, Constanius, who became senior emperor in the West in AD 305. Constantine was then given the military rule of Britain, Gaul and Spain. When Constantius died in 306, Constantine’s troops acclaimed him as his father’s successor. Constantine defeated one challenger after another until becoming sole emperor of both East and West by 324.

During his struggle for control of Rome Constantine had the experience which would transform his future and that of the empire as well. In 312, on the eve of a decisive battle for the city of Rome, Constantine had a dream or vision leading him to inscribe the monogram of Christ (☧) on his soldiers’ shields and standards. His biographer, the Church historian Eusebius tells that the image was accompanied by the message, “with this sign, you will conquer.” Constantine’s troops won the battle and Constantine began the religious transformation of the Roman Empire.

The next year Constantine and Licinius, who controlled part of the Eastern Empire, agreed on a policy of religious toleration, ending the persecution of Christians. Constantine’s victories in the East – and his own adoption of the Christian faith – assured the final end of persecution and the triumph of Christianity as the leading religion in his empire.

Empire and Church Are Transformed

After becoming sole ruler of the empire Constantine embarked on a series of actions which transformed both empire and Church. Most significantly he abolished the division of eastern and

western empires, unifying his realm with a new single monetary system as well. He established a new capital, the New Rome, on the site of the ancient town of Byzantium, thus minimizing the influence of the old pagan elite and the shrines with which the Old Rome abounded. The New Rome would eventually take on its founder's name as Constantinople.

In 325 Constantine embarked on a program to unify the Church as well. He summoned bishops from all over the empire to the First Ecumenical Council (Nicea I) to give it a universally recognized faith and structure. This council would produce the first part of the Symbol of Faith which we recite at every Liturgy to this day. It would also determine the regional primacies of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch as well as unify the date for celebrating Pascha. Later councils would complete the creed and establish the five major primacies of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

Focus on the Holy Land

Besides erecting a great church (St Peter's) in Old Rome, Constantine strove to renew Palestine as a "Holy Land." After the Jewish revolt in AD 135 the city had been closed to Jews by the Emperor Hadrian and maintained as a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina. Hadrian had built a Roman temple over the site of the Lord's tomb and maintained pagan worship there.

Constantine appointed his mother Helena as Empress, and put the imperial treasury at her disposal to adorn the Christian holy places. In 326-328 Helena journeyed to Palestine where she built the Churches of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Eleona on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives to commemorate Christ's ascension. She had Hadrian's temple destroyed and began the construction of the Church of the Resurrection. During the excavation three crosses were unearthed and, according to fourth century sources, Helena identified the Lord's cross when a sick woman was healed by touching it. Helena brought part of the cross to Old Rome and enshrined it is her palace which is now the Basilica of the Holy Cross.

St Helena is also credited with establishing churches on Mount Sinai (site of St Catherine's Monastery), and in Cyprus (site of the Stavrovouni Monastery). She reposed in 328/329 and was buried near St. Peter's in Old Rome.

Other rulers celebrated as Equals of the Apostles are St Boris I, ninth century ruler of Bulgaria and Ss Vladimir and Olga, tenth century rulers of Kievan Rus, who spearheaded the Christianization of their respective lands.

From the Vespers of the Feast

You gave Your precious Cross as a most powerful weapon to the emperor. Through it he reigned righteously on earth, shining with godliness. And in Your compassion he was counted worthy of Your heavenly kingdom. Therefore with him we glorify Your dispensation, almighty Jesus, Savior of our souls and Lover of mankind.

As the King of kings, the Lord who reigns over all, You, O Lover of mankind, granted Your servant the wisdom of Solomon, the meekness of David and the Orthodox faith of the apostles. Therefore we glorify Your dispensation, almighty Jesus, Savior of our souls and Lover of mankind.

You received the scepter from God, O Constantine, first emperor of Christians, when the hidden symbol of salvation appeared to you on earth. Having the life-giving cross as an invincible weapon, O blessed saint, you brought all the nations to the feet of Rome and you yourself were led to God.

With longing and love for Christ, the mother of a sweet offspring made haste to come to holy Zion, to the sacred place where our Savior was crucified in His desire to save us. Raising the cross there, she cried, rejoicing: Glory to Him who has given me what I desired!

May 25 – The Third Uncovering of the Head of John the Forerunner

THE PRINCIPAL FEASTS in our liturgical year commemorate some event in the life of Christ or of the Theotokos. A second category of feasts honors the memory of saints, often on the day of their repose. A third category of feasts recalls significant events in the history of the Church, such as the discovery and exaltation of the holy Cross or the seven Ecumenical Councils of the first millennium.

In this last category the Byzantine Churches observe two feasts concerning the head of St John the Forerunner. On February 24 the "First and Second Uncovering" of his head are recalled, On May 25 the "Third Uncovering" of this relic is observed.

The Gospel account of John's death and burial is found in Mt 14:3-12. There we are told that John was beheaded, that his head was given by Salome to her mother, and that "*Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus*" (v. 12). What became of John's head was not mentioned.

The Fate of John's Body

According to a very early local tradition, John's disciples took his body to Samaria, outside Herod's jurisdiction, and buried it in Sebastiya, near the tomb of the Prophet Elisha.

The adornment of the holy places and the spread of monasticism in the fourth century saw the rise of interest in the Holy Land and the establishment of monasteries on the holy sites.

Monastics, who revered John as a kind of proto-monk because of his life in the wilderness, settled in Sebastiya at the site of John's tomb.

According to Rufinus of Aquileia, who lived in Jerusalem at the time, pagans, during the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363), desecrated the tombs of both John and Elisha and burned their bones. Some of the remains were rescued by monks who brought them to their monastery in Jerusalem.

After Julian's brief reign the shrine was restored and at least some of the relics presumably returned. In 512 St John of Maiuma in Gaza visited Sebastiya, describing what he saw: "This site, in fact, was a particular chapel of the church, enclosed within gates because it contains two urns covered in gold and silver, in front of which burn perennial lamps: one is John the Baptist's, the other is Prophet Elisha's." The church was destroyed, probably by an earthquake, in the ninth century.

Palestine: the First Uncovering

Nicephorus and Symeon Metaphrastes (in accordance with Josephus) say that Herodias had John's head buried in the fortress of Machaerus where he had been slain. Other writers say that it was interred on the tetrarch's property in Jerusalem where it was discovered by two pilgrim-monks during the restoration of the city under Constantine the Great. For several years it was kept by local Christians as a treasured relic.

Syria: The Second Uncovering

A Syrian visiting Jerusalem acquired the head from some monks and brought it home to Emesa (Homs) where it came into the possession of another monk who buried it in his cave. A contemporary chronicle relates that in 452 St. John the Baptist appeared to Marcellus, the archimandrite of this monastery, and indicated where his head was hidden. The head was discovered and enshrined in a newly-build church which was then dedicated to St John.

This discovery was widely celebrated at the time and a feast and procession established in Constantinople on February 24 to commemorate it. Before long, the Forerunner's head was brought to Constantinople where it remained until the iconoclast period (730-842). The head was then secretly taken and hidden in Comana (Abkhazia today) for safekeeping.

Constantinople: The Third Uncovering

Around the year 850, with the final defeat of iconoclasm, the head of the Forerunner was solemnly retuned to Constantinople where major portions were enshrined at the Studion Monastery and the Monastery of the Forerunner. The upper portion remained in Constantinople until the disastrous sack of the city during the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Crusaders took the relic to Amiens in northern France where it was enshrined in the new cathedral.

In 1793 revolutionaries sacked the cathedral and seized its valuables. They took the reliquary but the mayor of Amiens hid the actual relic until 1816 when it was returned to the cathedral where it remains.

This relic was actually the upper portion of the face. The lower jaw was thought to be in Verdun in eastern France. In 1958 the two sections were subjected to anatomical study and found to come from different skulls. The Amiens portion was more ancient that the Verdun bone which was dated to the Middle Ages. In fact, portions of the lower jaw had been sent before the Fourth Crusade to Mount Athos and other monasteries.

In 2010 skeletal remains were discovered in a case inscribed with John's name in Greek which was found beneath the altar in the ruins of an ancient Bulgarian church. DNA and radiocarbon testing showed that the remains likely belonged to a Middle Eastern man who lived in the first century AD!

What About Damascus?

In the center of Damascus' Ummayad Mosque stands an imposing shrine said to contain the head of the Forerunner which is venerated by both Christians and Muslims.

In AD 379 Emperor Theodosius I converted Damascus' temple of Jupiter, the largest Roman temple in Syria, into a Christian cathedral which, in the sixth century, was dedicated to St John the Baptist. The church was rebuilt as a mosque in 706. The Arab historian, Ibn al-Faqih, reported that Zayd Ibn al-Waqid, who directed the work on the mosque, discovered the skull of "Prophet Yahia" (John the Baptist) in a nearby cave.

From the Services of these Feasts

February 24:

This is the head of' the one who pointed out the Lamb of God manifested in the flesh, and who called us to the saving ways of repentance by following the precepts of God. This is the head which reproached the iniquity of Herod, and for this was separated from its body. Remaining hidden under the ground for a long time, it has dawned like a radiant sun to say to us, "Repent! In the compunction of your hearts, become once more friends of the Lord, who grants the world great mercy!"

O Forerunner, your head, divinely preserved, has risen from the bosom of the earth as a treasury of the graces of God. Having received it, we bow down in reverence, O glorious prophet of Christ. Through you, we have been given wondrous miracles and have obtained the remission of our sins.

May 25:

Your holy head, blessed Forerunner, poured out abundant grace. It was shown without his foreknowledge to the priest who was wise in God. He quickly went with faith and grace and openly brought about its sanctified return with the emperor and the divinely wise people who fervently maintain the Orthodox faith.

We celebrate the third revelation of your precious head. When it was severed, O glorious one, the Trinity crowned it for your godly zeal. The ranks of angels, the company of martyrs, the apostles of God and all the prophets rejoice in its discovery. Together with them, ever remember us, O Forerunner of the Lord.

June - The Fast of the Apostles

(From the close of the Pentecostarion to the Feast of Ss Peter and Paul)

"AFTER THE LONG FEAST OF PENTECOST, fasting is especially necessary to purify our thoughts and render us worthy to receive the Gifts of the Holy Spirit ... Therefore, the salutary custom was established of fasting after the joyful days during which we celebrated the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and the coming of the Holy Spirit" *(from a sermon of Pope St. Leo the Great, +461).*

The fifty days of feasting from Pascha to Pentecost is followed by a time of fasting which we call the Fast of the Apostles. The first evidence of this Fast is found in the writings of the fourth century Fathers, Saints Athanasius the Great of Alexandria and Ambrose of Milan. In a letter to his friend and supporter, Emperor Constans, St Athanasius describes the practice of the Alexandrian Church: "During the week following Pentecost, the people who observed the Fast went out to the cemetery to pray."

Some 20 years later, St. Ambrose (+397) writes about the practice in his diocese: "The Lord so ordained it that as we have participated in His sufferings during the Forty Days, so we should also rejoice in His Resurrection during the season of Pentecost. We do not fast during the season of Pentecost since our Lord Himself was present amongst us during those days … Christ's presence was like nourishing food for the Christians. So too, during Pentecost, we feed on the Lord who is present among us. On the days following His ascension into heaven, however, we again fast" (Sermon 61).

This Fast was first seen as a resumption of fasting following the Paschal season. During the fifty days of Pascha we have celebrated Christ's resurrection, then His ascension and finally the sending forth of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. We have feasted while celebrating the presence of the risen Christ, but now it is time to return to the more everyday practice of Christians: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

The struggle to be what we have become, to "put on Christ," demands a lifelong effort. We observe times to celebrate the mysteries of Christ among us – the Lord's Day and the Great Feasts on which we do not fast. But these are respites from the more ordinary Christian practice of fasting. As the Lord said when asked by the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees why His disciples were not fasting, "*As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days*" (Mk 2:19-20).

When Does This Fast Begin?

It appears that, in the fourth and fifth centuries, this Fast began on the day after Pentecost, the last day of the feast. This is still the custom in the Armenian Church which fasts for the week of Pentecost. Something of this practice survives in our custom of the "kneeling prayers" offered at

vespers on the afternoon of Pentecost. With these prayers kneeling is resumed as the common practice of prayer which had been suspended during the paschal feast.

Later Pentecost was extended to last one week. As a result this Fast begins on the day following the Sunday of All Saints, the octave of Pentecost. As St. Symeon of Thessalonica, wrote in the fifteenth century: "For one week after the descent of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the Apostolic Constitution composed by Clement, we celebrate, and then during the following week, we fast in honor of the Apostles."

As Symeon noted, this season, which began as a simple resumption of fasting after Pentecost, was later connected with the apostles and their struggles, particularly with the establishment of the feast of the principal apostles, Ss. Peter and Paul, on June 29. In the ordinary Byzantine and Coptic practice, the Fast lasts from the second Monday after Pentecost to June 28, the eve of the apostles' feast. This means that the Fast may last for only a few days or may last four or five weeks, depending on the date of Pascha in any given year.

This Fast is not kept with the same rigor as the Great Fast or even the Dormition Fast. In Greek and Slavic practice full fasting is prescribed only on certain days during this period. On other days fish, wine and oil are permitted.

In the Middle East the Fast has come to be associated more with the apostles rather than with Pentecost. The Syriac – and, until recently, the Maronite – Churches observed this Fast for four days, from June 25 to 28. The thirteenth-century Melkite Patriarch of Antioch, Balsamon, insisted on a seven day fast. Today the Melkite Church prescribes a ten-day fast, beginning on June 19.

Keeping This Fast Today

This Fast is sometimes described as a remembrance of the hardships endured by the apostles in proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world. St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, dramatically outlined some of the difficulties he endured during his ministry. "*From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches"* (2 Cor 11:24-28). To be sure, each of the apostles could tell similar tales.

The Churches established by the apostles in the Middle East are sharing in their sufferings once more. Christians in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Syria .and elsewhere in Asia and Africa are enduring renewed assaults from Hindu, Islamic and Jewish fundamentalists as well as from the Communist regimes in the Far East. Persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, China, India, Indonesia, Libya, Nigeria, North Korea, Mali, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sudan, Tanzania and Turkey is reported almost daily. This Fast is a particularly appropriate time to pray for our suffering brethren in these countries.

You might chose to express your solidarity with the persecuted Churches abroad by adding the following prayer to your Lenten meals each day of the Fast.

A Prayer for Those Suffering Persecution

Lord, bring an end to tragedy and suffering. Deliver Your Church and Your faithful people from every evil with Your mighty hand. Help us, O God, for You were crucified and died for the salvation of all. Help us, that among us, and in all the world, hatred may be replaced with love, unrest may be replaced with peace, and sorrow may be replaced with happiness, that we have a peaceful life as Your people and live as brothers and sisters with one another.

Remember our enemies, those who hate us and oppress us, and repay them not according to their deeds, but rather give them reason and understanding, according to Your great mercy, so that they may see that evil cannot bring good.

You are the God of mercy, goodness and the Lover of mankind, and unto You we ascribe glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

"It is possible for one who fasts not to be rewarded for his fasting. How? – when indeed we abstain from foods but do not abstain from iniquities; when we do not eat meat but gnaw to pieces the homes of the poor; when we do not become drunkards with wine but we become drunkards with evil pleasures; when we abstain all the day, but all the night we spend in unchaste shows. Then what is the benefit of abstention from foods, when on the one hand you deprive your body of a selected food, but on the other you offer yourself unlawful fare?" (St John Chrysostom)

The Apostolic Tradition

WHEN CHRIST SENT THE HOLY SPIRIT upon the apostles and their followers on the first Pentecost, He gave them the divine help to fulfill the command He had given them, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*…" (Mt 28:19). As we read in the Gospels, they did just that: "*And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs*" (Mk 16:20).

With the end of our Pentecost feast, our attention moves to the apostles and to their work of spreading the message of Christ's resurrection. Observing the Fast of the Apostles gives us the chance to recall the hardships they endured in fulfilling their mission and to unite by prayer and fasting with those continuing their apostolic mission today.

The first seven chapters of the Acts of the Apostles tell us of their activities in Jerusalem. Beginning in chapter eight we see them and their companions taking the Gospel to Samaria, to the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza, to Lydda and Joppa (chapter 9), to Caesarea, the Roman

provincial capital (chapter 10) and "*as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch*" (Acts 11:19). When Saul set out on his pursuit of Christians, there were already believers in Damascus (Acts 9). After his conversion, Saul/Paul would bring the Gospel through Asia Minor and into Europe. The Acts of the Apostles ends with St Paul being brought to Rome for trial before Caesar. He and St Peter would die there as martyrs in the fulfillment of Christ's command.

Apart from James, the brother of John, whose death is mentioned in Acts 12:2, none of the other apostles chosen by Christ is mentioned in Acts. Some of the Twelve seem never to have left the Holy Land, remaining together as a kind of apostolic college; others are said to have gone far in spreading the Gospel. The many lives of these apostles written over the centuries sought to fill in the details.

Perhaps the most travelled of the Twelve apart from Peter was St Thomas, who was said to have gone eastward through the Persian Empire to India's Malabar Coast, according to the Acts of Thomas (c. 200-225 AD). The Syriac Churches of that region, known as St Thomas Christians, claim descent from this apostle's converts among the Jewish merchants who had settled there.

The Apostolic Tradition

While the apostles lived they were clearly the ultimate authority among the followers of Christ. They had not only seen the Lord, they were the first chosen by Him as His ambassadors to the world. But when there was no one left who had actually witnessed the life, death and resurrection of the Lord, to whom or to what did the early Christians look for surety in their faith?

Second-generation Christians were counseled to remember what the eye-witnesses (the apostles) had passed on to them. Thus Timothy, the disciple of St Paul, was advised by his mentor, "*Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus*" (2 Tm 1:13). But where would the next generation of Christians find the teachings of the apostles? First and second century believers looked to three sources for these teachings: the Apostolic Writings, the Apostolic Churches and the Apostolic Succession of Church leaders who maintained the faith of the apostles.

The Apostolic Writings – Over the next few years the core of this Apostolic Tradition would be written down and circulated among the different local Churches. Some books would be recognized as reflecting that tradition by individual Churches or regional synods. They would form what we call the New Testament. Other books would not be included in the canon (the comprehensive list of the accepted books). Some were rejected because the Jesus they portrayed was not the Jesus of the Apostolic Tradition. Today they are called apocryphal gospels and acts. It was only at the end of the third century that the final list of New Testament books would be accepted by all the local Churches then in existence.

Other early writings were respected by the Churches and were considered canonical in some Churches, but not in all. One of the oldest is an epistle from "The Church of God which sojourns in Rome to the Church of God which sojourns in Corinth" (1:1), traditionally called "First Clement," after St Clement I, who was Bishop of Rome from AD 88 to 99, when this work as written. I Clement was not listed in the final canon.

Other early works which were considered Scripture for a time are the first century *Didache* or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, and the *Protoevangelium of James*, dated to the early second-century.

The Apostolic Churches – In the mid-first century Christians looked for leadership to the Church of Jerusalem, which later believers would call "the Mother of all the Churches." In Acts 15:1-29 we read how St Paul's controversial mission to the Gentiles was discussed by the apostles and elders of that Church. When the Romans devastated Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in AD 70, the city's Christians were scattered. The Churches in regional centers which boasted connections to the apostles, such as Alexandria in Egypt, the "See of St Mark," and Antioch in Syria, "*where the disciples were first called* '*Christians*'" (Acts 11:26), became prominent. By the end of the first century the Church of Rome, where both Peter and Paul had ended their days, had come to be considered "the Church which presides in love" as St Ignatius of Antioch called it in his epistle to the Romans.

The Apostolic Succession – First century Christians also noted how the apostles, "… preaching through countries and cities, appointed the first-fruits [of their labors] to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe, having first proved them by the Spirit… and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry" (1 Clement 42, 44). Thus the body of bishops came to be known as the "successors of the apostles," and the guarantors of apostolic faith in the Churches throughout the world.

From the Apostolic Tradition

THERE are two ways, one of life and one of death, but the difference between the two ways is great. This is the way of life: First, you shall love God who made you; secondly, you shall love your neighbor as yourself; and whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another. Now, this is the meaning of the words, "Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those that persecute you"…

Now the second commandment of the Teaching is: You shall not commit murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not corrupt boys, you shall not fornicate, you shall not steal, you shall not practice magic or use spells, you shall not kill a child by abortion, or destroy that which has been begotten. You shall not desire whatever belongs to your neighbor, you shall not swear falsely or bear false witness. You shall not speak evil (of anyone), or bear malice towards them… You shall hate no one, but some you shall reprove, and for some you shall pray, and some you shall love more than your own life."

The Didache, 1, 2

June 1 – The Holy Martyr Justin the Philosopher

INCREASINGLY IN THE SECOND AND THIRD CENTURIES a number of people in the Roman Empire who were trained in classical philosophy became Christians. Many would become the intellectual leaders of the Church, the great Fathers to whom we still look for inspiration. One of the first pagan philosophers to embrace Christianity was Justin, born in Nablus into a pagan Roman family who had settled in Palestine in the first century. Justin tells that he was given the classical Roman education and explored the various philosophical currents of his time, ultimately adopting Platonism. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* 8, Justin writes of encountering an old man – a Palestinian or Syrian Christian – who encouraged him to explore the Biblical prophets who, he said, were more trustworthy than pagan philosophers. Then, as Justin would recall, "Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and while turning over His words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable."

Justin lived the life of a traveling lecturer promoting his newly-adopted philosophy, Christianity. Arriving in Rome he established a philosophical school advancing his faith by his lectures and writings, several of which have survived. He taught that the writings of the Old Testament prophets were fulfilled in what he called "the memoirs of the apostles" (the Gospels).

Like St Paul, Justin came to see that the most exalted pagan philosophers had "the law written in their hearts." He called Socrates and Heraclitus "seminal Christians." They possessed the seed of the Gospel; the mature fruit would be revealed only in Christ.

Justin was also deeply impressed by the fearless witness of the Christian martyrs in the face of persecution. He writes, "For I myself, too, when I was delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death …perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure. For what sensual or intemperate man … would not rather continue always the present life" (*Second Apology,* 12).

Justin was subjected to the same fate in AD 165, denounced by a pagan philosopher, Crescens, whom he had debated. According to his pupil Tatian, Justin was tried with six others by the prefect of the city and was beheaded.

Justin's view of classical philosophers as "seminal Christians" may be seen in the frescos of Plato, Socrates and the rest who often adorn the outer porches of Greek churches. During the Ottoman period the only schools allowed to the Christians were often conducted on these porches under the watchful gaze of these philosophers.

You emptied the cup of the wisdom of the Greeks, yet still remained thirsty until you came to the well where you found water springing up to eternal life. Having drunk deeply of it, you also drank the cup which Christ gave to His disciples. Wherefore, O Justin, we praise you as a philosopher and martyr of Christ.

Troparion, June 1

June 19 – The Holy Apostle Jude

ARE THERE TROUBLEMAKERS in your parish? In every congregation of Christians we can expect to find a few saints, a few sinners, and a lot of people who are a bit of both. Unfortunately one can often find people who join a church or become active in its organizations for social, financial or political gain. They tend to keep their motivations secret in order to win the approval of other members.

Others are motivated by a desire to dominate or control others. Always ready to make a speech, they push their own agendas to such an extent that they become divisive elements in churches. They may take on the clergy, the members of the church council or other parishioners. Easy targets are the less influential parish groups such as the youth or any other group sharing church facilities.

The Apostle Jude pulled no punches in dealing with such people. He confronted the issue of divisiveness in his General Epistle, one of the last – and shortest – books of the New Testament. He described such people as barren. They are, he said, "*…spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever*" (Ju 1:12-13).

Jude summons several examples from the Old Testament to show what such people can expect to receive: "*Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah*" (v. 11). Still, Jude notes, some of these people can be corrected gently but others need the fear of God put in them lest they perish: "*on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire…*" (vv. 22-23). Church leaders need to know when to be strict and when to be lenient in dealing with such people: when to apply the law and when to extend clemency (*oikonomeia*).

The Apostle Jude

The Scripture identifies the author of this epistle as Jude, "*the brother of James*" (Ju 1:1), but which James is his brother? There are three known in the New Testament; two are described as having a brother named Jude.

One James in the New Testament is "the brother of the Lord," who is thought to be the son of St. Joseph by his first wife (in the West James is usually described at the Lord's *relative*). When the people of Nazareth wondered about what they were hearing about Jesus they said, "*Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas?*" (Mt 13:54-55) Both "Jude" and "Judas" translate the same Hebrew name, Yahudah; English speakers have always felt squeamish about giving the same name to both the faithful apostle and the traitor.

Another James in the New Testament is found in the Gospel list of the Twelve: "*James the son of Alphaeus*" (Lk 6:15). Paired with him is "*Judas the son of James*" (v.16). So our Jude is either the brother of James, the Lord's brother, who would become the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, or the son of James, the son of Alphaeus, who was one of the Twelve.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jude is not mentioned in the list of the Twelve Apostles. Instead a Thaddeus is named in his place. These names have often been harmonized as "Jude Thaddeus." It was not unusual, especially in a border region such as Galilee, for people to have both a Greek and a Semitic name, but there is no concrete evidence that this was so in the case of St Jude.

The Acts of Simon and Jude

The New Testament makes no further mention of St Jude or others of the apostles. As a result many apocryphal Gospels and Acts were written in the first centuries to detail their later adventures. Simon and Jude are variously described as preaching in North Africa, Gaul, Britain and the East. One such source, *The Acts of Simon and Jude*, has these two apostles preaching and ultimately martyred in the Persian Empire. It is thought that this text comes from as late as the fourth century AD, but its description of first-century Persia is said to be remarkably accurate.

Material from *The Acts of Simon and Jude* came to be included in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legends*, a thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives beloved in the Medieval West. It was printed in countless editions and soon translated from Latin into most European languages, accounting for the popularity of this otherwise unknown Apostle in the Middle Ages.

Jude and His "Hopeless Cases"

In the West today St. Jude has become known as the "patron of hopeless cases" or "patron of the impossible." How did this come about?

This devotion may have been popularized by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and later by St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373). She reputedly had a vision in which the Lord Himself told her to pray to St. Jude with faith and confidence, because the apostle would "show himself to be the most willing to give you help." This was one of a host of visions of Christ, the Virgin and other saints who appeared to her and dictated prayers and devotions for her to observe. A collection of these visions, *The Prophecies and Revelations of St Bridget*, was another popular work in the Medieval West.

Jude and the Apocrypha

One unusual feature of St. Jude's Epistle is that it quotes directly from a Jewish work called the Book of Enoch, or 1 Enoch, dating from the second century BC. This book is considered part of the Old Testament by the Ethiopian and Eritrean Churches but not by any other Church. It was

well-known by first-century Jews, however, who saw it as having great historical and devotional interest.

Jude 1:14-15 quotes the following passage directly from 1 Enoch 1:9: "*Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.*"

An undisputedly apocryphal book, The Ascension of Moses, is the source of another passage, Jude 1:9: "*Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling 'accusation, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'*" This first- century AD Jewish work was known to early Christian writers, but was long thought to have been lost, or even never to have existed. Finally, in the nineteenth century, a copy was discovered in Milan's Ambrosian Library by an Italian scholar.

June 23 – Feast of the Visitation of the All-holy Theotokos

"Blessed Are You Among Women"

TWO OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY used prayers in our tradition are taken from the same Gospel narrative: the visit of the Holy Virgin to her older cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist (Lk 1:39-56). Both the Angelic Salutation ("Hail, O Theotokos…") and the Canticle of the Theotokos ("My soul magnifies the Lord…") are taken from this passage. The event which it describes is generally called the Visitation.

According to Luke, the angel Gabriel who told her that she would bear a son also told her that "*Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren*" (Lk 1:36). Mary then travelled the nearly hundred miles from Nazareth to the little town in the hills of Judea where Zachary and Elizabeth lived. According to tradition this town was Ain Karim, which then was five miles from Jerusalem, but is today incorporated in that city's municipal boundaries.

The Holy Virgin greeted her cousin, "*And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord*" (Lk 1:41-45).

The Holy Virgin replied with the Canticle which we sing daily at Matins/Orthros: "*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*" (vv. 46-47). This canticle is clearly modeled on the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), which that mother prayed when she learned that she would have a son. This led many modern scholars to assume that Luke put these words in

Mary's mouth, using 1 Samuel as his model. They did not realize that people steeped in Scripture as Mary was would naturally weave the sacred text into their speech when they spoke of the things of God.

Mary, the Ark of God

It may be that St Luke had another Old Testament passage in mind when he wrote the story of the visitation. Note the highlighted parallels from the story of David's visit to the Ark of the Covenant described in 2 Samuel: "***David arose and went*** *... to bring up from there the ark of God, ... and he said, "**How can the ark of the LORD come to me?**" ... The ark of the LORD* ***remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite three months****. ... So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with gladness. Then* ***David danced before the LORD with all his might****..."* (2 Sm 6:2-16).

The Holy Virgin is the new Ark of God, bearing within her – not the words of God's commandments, the tablets of the Law, but the Living Word of God Himself. Before Him the unborn son of Elizabeth leaps in her womb as David danced before the Ark.

St Gregory the Wonderworker (213-c. 270) would develop this image of Mary as the Ark to describe the Virgin as full of grace ("Wrought with gold both within and without"): "Come also, dearly beloved, and chant the melody taught us by the inspired harp of David, saying 'Arise, O Lord, into Your resting place – You and the Ark of Your holiness.' For the Holy Virgin is truly an ark, wrought with gold both within and without, that has received the whole treasury of the sanctuary."

The Feast of the Visitation

This festival has a unique history. We know that it was observed in the early Church, at least in Ain Karim. The pre-Islamic Jerusalem Calendar notes that a festival was kept there yearly on August 28.

The 11th-century Muslim scholar Muhammad al-Biruni (abu-RaiHan) documented the practice of the Syriac Melkite community in northeastern Persia. There May 4 marked the "Feast of Roses, according to the ancient rite as it is celebrated in Khwaarizm. On this day they bring Juri-roses to the churches, the reason for which is this, that on this day Mary presented the first roses to Elizabeth, the mother of John." He then notes that May 15 "is the Feast of Roses according to the new rite (postponed to this date because roses are still very scarce on the fourth). It is celebrated on the same date in Khorasan, not on the original date."

Today the Syriac Churches observe May 15 as the feast of Our Lady of the Harvest. They remember the Visitation on the third Sunday of the Announcement, their six week pre-Christmas cycle.

There is no mention of this feast in any Byzantine Church until the nineteenth century. In 1844 the Melkite Patriarch Maximos III decreed that this feast should be kept on the Friday after Pascha. The Greek Church honors a miraculous spring in Constantinople on this date as the Feast of the Theotokos, the Life-Giving Spring. The patriarch, however, was embroiled in a conflict

with the Ecumenical Patriarchate at this time. He had recently achieved civil emancipation from the control of the Patriarch of Constantinople. In retaliation the Greeks insisted that this new Catholic community be obliged to wear clerical headgear that was clearly different from that of the Greeks.

Maximos reacted by suppressing the Greek feast: "We recognize the desire of many people from our Rum Catholic parishes to honor Our Lady the Mother of God on the aforementioned day with a special service to the point that some of them take part in vainly celebrating this feast to Our Lady. From another perspective, we cannot participate in honoring the consecration of a church for people who have left the communion of the Catholic Church." In the most recent revision of the liturgical books of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Patriarchate the Feast of the Visitation has been transferred to June 23, one day before the Feast of St. John the Baptist's Nativity.

The Feast of the Visitation was added to the calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1883 when the Russian representation in Jerusalem consecrated a church in Ain Karim named "The Meeting of the Most Holy Virgin and St. Elizabeth." Its feast was set for March 30 and extended to the entire Russian Church. In an ironic twist, the typikon transfers this feast, if March 30 occurs during Great Week, to… the Friday of Bright Week.

St Ambrose on the Visitation

"Notice the contrast and the choice of words. Elizabeth is the first to hear Mary's voice, but John is the first to be aware of grace. She hears with the ears of the body, but he leaps for joy at the meaning of the mystery. She is aware of Mary's presence, but he is aware of the Lord's: a woman aware of a woman's presence, the Forerunner aware of the pledge of our salvation. The women speak of the grace they have received while the children are active in secret, unfolding the mystery of love with the help of their mothers, who prophesy by the spirit of their sons.

"The child leaps in the womb; the mother is filled with the Holy Spirit, but not before her son. Once the son has been filled with the Holy Spirit, he fills his mother with the same Spirit."

June 24 – Nativity of the Holy Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist, John

Harbinger of the Sun

OUR CHURCH CALENDAR remembers many events in Christian history: martyrdoms, ecumenical councils, miracles, and even earthquakes. There are only three births celebrated, however: that of the Theotokos (September 8), the Nativity of Christ Himself (December 25) and the birth of St John the Forerunner (June 24).

We do not know where or when this feast was first observed, but it is mentioned in writings of fourth- and fifth-century Fathers in both East and West (Saints Ambrose, Augustine and John Chrysostom). The oldest shrine of the Forerunner, at Ain-Karem, home of his parents Zachariah

and Elizabeth, was destroyed during the fifth-century revolt of the Samaritans against Byzantine rule. In the sixth century the French Council of Agde (506) declared this feast a "holyday of obligation" – not surprising, considering the esteem in which Christ Himself considered John (see Mt 11:11).

John's Conception Foretold

The Gospel story of John's conception and birth, which is the Biblical basis of this feast, is found in Luke 1. We read that John's father, Zachariah, was a priest "*of the division of Abijah*" (Lk 1:4). According to the custom of the day, priests were enrolled in various groupings or divisions which took turns serving in the temple for two weeks at a time. The Gospel says that, while Zachariah was offering incense in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that Elizabeth, Zachariah's wife, would bear him a son, who was to be named John.

Zachariah could not understand how this could be, as both he and his wife were up in years. Because of his reluctance to believe, Zachariah was told by the angel, "*Behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time*" (Lk 1:20). And so it happened.

John and Elijah

The angel tells Zachariah that his son would go before the Lord "*in the spirit and power of Elijah, to 'turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"* (Lk 1:17).

In this promise we find an echo of the following prophecy from the Book of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophetic books. "*Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse*" (Mal 4:5-6). In some arrangements of the Bible, these are the last words of the Old Testament, pointing it forward to the Messianic Age to come.

Believing Jews held that Elijah would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. Many saw John as "Elijah," the fulfillment of that prophecy, foretelling to all the coming of Christ. As the Lord Himself said about John, "*If you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come*" (Mt 11:14).

The Forerunner Is Born

The Gospel story of John continues with the narrative of his birth: "N*ow Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zachariah. His mother answered and said, 'No; he shall be called John.'*

"But they said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.' So they made signs to his father —what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, 'His name is John.' So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God" (*Lk* 1:57-64).

St Augustine saw Zachariah's muteness as symbolic of the time before Christ and viewed his release as an image of its passing. "The release of Zachariah's voice at the birth of John," he wrote, "has the same significance as the tearing of the veil of the Temple at the crucifixion of Christ. His tongue is released because a voice is being born… the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

The Canticle of Zachariah

The Gospel records as Zachariah's praise of God a beautiful hymn which has found a place in the liturgy of both East and West. Often given the title "Benedictus" (from the first word of the Latin translation), this hymn is for the most part a string of verses from the psalms and other Old Testament texts. It glorifies God for His greatness and for the love He has shown to His people.

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life" (Lk 1:68-75).

At this point the hymn begins to make specific reference to John. He is described – with what some have called the clarity of hindsight – as prophet, forerunner, and preacher of repentance. These are, of course, the qualities which the Gospels attribute to John during his ministry at the Jordan.

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His way to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Orient from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:76-79).

In our liturgy this canticle is added to the hymn of the Virgin at the ninth ode of orthros during the Fasts.

The One from the East

The word *anatole*, translated above as *Orient,* would be used repeatedly in our hymns referring to Christ. Sometimes it is translated as *Dayspring*, or as *the One who rises.* We hear it in the Christmas troparion ("to recognize in You the One who rises from on high"). In the troparion "Dance, O Isaiah" sung at crownings and ordinations the word is translated as "His name is Orient."

The word *anatole* literally means sunrise and, by extension, *the East* (where the sun rises). It invokes the image of the rising sun, which itself is an image of Christ. He is the Dayspring, the Sunrise, of God's saving plan for us. As the sunrise brings the promise of a new day, the appearance of Christ brings the assurance that the Kingdom of God is now at hand. As we sing in the exapostilarion of Christmas, "From on high our Savior came, the rising Sun who shone from the East." And John is the herald of that rising Sun.

June 29 – Feast of the Prime Apostles, Peter and Paul

2 Corinthians 11:21-12:9 – Matthew 16:13-19

When Icons Argue

THE FAST OF THE APOSTLES which follows the feast of Pentecost concludes with two special commemorations: on June 29 we remember the glorious leaders of the apostles, Peter and Paul; on the next day we observe a synaxis (assembly) for all Twelve. The feast of Saints Peter and Paul is particularly observed as the throne-feast of two apostolic patriarchates: Antioch (where both apostles ministered earlier in the lives) and Rome (where both were martyred and buried).

Peter and Paul in Antioch

The Acts of the Apostles devotes its first part to the ministry of St Peter in the Holy Land. The second part concentrates on the ministry of St. Paul in Asia Minor and Europe. In the middle we find reports of the first controversy among the Christians: whether Gentile converts must observe the Law of Moses as well as believing in Christ.

The original Christian community in Jerusalem, led by James, the Lord's Brother, was composed of believing Jews. They objected to Peter receiving Gentiles into the Church. Peter defended his actions because the Gentile believers had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Jerusalem believers responded in awe, "*Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life*" (Acts 10:18).

The controversy erupted again, however, when St Paul was sent by the Church of Antioch to preach Christ in Cyprus and Asia Minor. Although he first taught in the Jewish synagogues, he soon gained a greater following among the Gentiles. When Paul returned to Antioch and reported what he had done, news spread to Jerusalem. Jewish believers in Christ from Jerusalem told Paul's Gentile converts that they also had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses.

St Peter was drawn into the controversy when he came to Antioch, as St Paul describes in Gal 2: "*...I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from*

James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision" (Gal 2:11-12).

Ultimately the dispute was taken to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. There Peter defended Paul, saying "*Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*" (Acts 15:10) A popular icon shows the reconciled apostles embracing. Finally James issued his ruling as head of the local Church: Gentile converts to Christ need only abstain from "*things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled and from sexual immorality*" (Acts 15:29).

Here the apostles retained the practice recorded in the story of Noah where God says, "*Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it"* (Gen 9:4). Since strangled animals do not shed blood they too were forbidden.

The ban on consuming blood was frequently repeated during the first centuries for a reason not found in Acts. Fourth-century Christians in Asia Minor found themselves in conflict with the Manichean sect which prohibited the eating of meat. The Christians countered at the Synod of Gangra (AD 340) by defending the eating of meat, as long as the prohibition of blood was observed. The decree of this synod was confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

We continue to observe this ban on fast days. We do not eat meat or fish, which have red blood, but may eat shellfish which do not.

St Peter is traditionally said to have remained in Antioch for seven years while St Paul continued on his missionary journeys. Peter's family is said to have remained there and, as far back as the first century AD, people in Antioch were claiming descent from the chief apostle. Certain Semaan families of modern-day Syria and Lebanon continue to make this claim.

Peter and Paul in Rome

The last chapters of Acts speak of St. Paul's journey to Rome. Arrested in Jerusalem, he was tried by the Roman procurator, Porcius Festus. Paul, claiming his right as a Roman citizen, appealed to be heard by Caesar himself. The procurator acceded, "*You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go*" (Acts 25:12).

Acts concludes by saying that, once in Rome St Paul lived under guard *"two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God…*" (Acts 28:30-31). As a Roman citizen, St Paul was ultimately beheaded.

St Peter's connection with Rome is not documented in Scripture, but written evidence from as early as the second century attests that he was thought to have preached there, where he was crucified upside down at his own request, feeling unworthy to die in the same way that Jesus did.

Two great churches were built over their burial places in the fourth century by St Constantine the Great. He erected St Peter's on the Vatican Hill, which was replaced in the sixteenth century by the basilica we see today. Following modern excavations the bones of a man in his 60s was unearthed there and on June 26, 1968 Pope Paul VI announced that the relics of St. Peter had been identified.

Constantine also commissioned St Paul's Outside the Walls which has been enlarged and rebuilt several times in the succeeding centuries. The saint's body lies in a crypt below the altar, except for his head which is enshrined in the pope's cathedral, St John Lateran.

Throughout history the Church of Rome has been considered pre-eminent because of the presence of these two apostles. Tertullian perhaps expressed it best: "What a happy Church that is, on which the apostles poured out their whole doctrine with their blood; where Peter had a passion like that of the Lord, where Paul was crowned with the death of John [the Baptist, by being beheaded]."

The Church Praises the Apostles

With what garlands of praise shall we crown Peter and Paul, the greatest of the heralds of the Word of God, distinct in their person, but one in spirit – the one the chief of the apostles, the other who labored more than all the rest? Christ God, who is most merciful, fittingly crowned them both with diadems of glory and immortality.

What songs of praise could be worthy of Peter and Paul? They are like two wings on which the knowledge of God spreads out to the far ends of the earth and soars aloft to Heaven, two hands from which the Gospel pours forth grace, two feet on which the doctrine of truth travels about the world, two rivers of wisdom, two arms of the cross through which the merciful Christ casts down the pride of demons!

With what spiritual songs shall we praise Peter and Paul? The voices of the fearful Sword of the Spirit, the illustrious ornament of Rome, the delight of the whole world, the God-inspired tablets of the New Testament, conceived and uttered in Sion by Christ, the all-merciful God!

Stichera from Vespers for June 29

Peter, the Rock of Faith

MOST OF THE EPISTLES found in the New Testament are attributed to St. Paul. In addition there are three Epistles of St John, one each of Ss. James and Jude, and two of St Peter. Since these are not read at a Sunday Divine Liturgy, we may be less familiar with them. They are all read at weekday Liturgies in the time between the Theophany and the beginning of the Great Fast. In addition portions of 1 Peter are read at Great Vespers on June 29, the feast of Ss. Peter and Paul.

1 Peter is addressed to Christians in "*Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia*" (1 Pt 1:2) which were all Roman provinces in Asia Minor (Turkey today). Many of the Churches there were most likely the result of missionary activity from Antioch, which had been St. Peter's home in the 40s and 50s. St. Peter, we know, was martyred in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero (c. 67-68 AD) and 1 Peter was likely written there. The letter concludes with greetings from the Church "*who is in Babylon*" (1 Pt 5:13), as believers of the day called Rome. They saw themselves as exiles in that pagan society, much as the Jews who were exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BC.

The "Diaspora"

The Christians in Asia Minor, to whom the letter in addressed, are described as "*pilgrims of the diaspora*" (1 Pt 1:2), or "dispersion." Exiles – from the Jews in Babylon to Greeks or Russians in America – have used this term referring to their status as political refugees, strangers in an alien country. St. Peter is using the term in another sense. All believers in the world are exiles, dispersed in either a pagan society (like the first century Roman Empire), a Hindu or Muslim society (like so many Christians in Asia or Africa today), or a pluralistic secular society such as ours. Like the Israelites of old, who "*confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the eart*h" (Heb 11:13), we too are pilgrims passing through or sojourners (temporary residents) here, but "*our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (*Phil* 3: 20).

Our Life in the Church

Much of this epistle is devoted to proposing ways in which we ought to live in this "diaspora." As Christians we are committed to living by the Gospel, according to the values of God's Kingdom, the highest of which is love. Christians are to love one another fervently, without hypocrisy (see 1 Pt 1:22). This is certainly something more than "coffee-hour love" – being nice in a social setting. People in any society may face economic hardship from time to time. How should a church respond when a member loses his job, can't pay the rent, or is threatened with foreclosure? As the Apostle James insists, our response points to the quality of our faith. "*If a brother or sister is naked or destitute of daily food and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*" (Jas 2:15-17). Faith and love must be made concrete by action.

What About the Unbelievers?

Most of the people in Asia Minor – like many of the people with whom we interact every day – would have been unbelievers. St. Peter sets out these principles for dealing with them. First of all, these Christians – presumably all converts – were no longer to live as unbelievers do, according to the "*aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers*" (1 Pt 1:18). Roman life was organized around festivals in honor of pagan gods and goddesses. Roman culture found no fault with practices such as abortion, infanticide or homosexuality. Jews – and consequently Christians – viewed these things as contrary to God's plan for His people. There could be no

compromise with the dominant culture on such matters. Those who are in Christ are called to be holy, set apart for God.

Christians in a pagan world were to observe all the commandments and to conduct themselves honorably among the unbelievers, "*as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice*" (1 Pt 2:16). They were not to assume that Christianity was simply a matter of not worshipping the Roman gods. Those who claimed to be "in Christ" should expect to follow a higher standard of behavior than those who did not know the true God. As the Lord Himself indicated, they were to be *in* the world but not *of* the world.

At the same time Christians were not to dismiss non-Christians and their world as unworthy of their respect. Christ had come "to enlighten and sanctify everyone in the world" (see Jn 1:9); consequently believers were bound to honorable relationships with all men and to the legitimate structures of civil authority. "*Submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake… for this is the will of God*" (1 Pt 2:13, 15). After all, the Lord Himself told Peter to pay the temple tax "*lest we offend them*" (Mt 17:27).

At the same time, as Peter knows too well, Christians may still suffer at the hands of their unbelieving neighbors. People often see their way of life threatened when others live in ways contrary to it. In Peter's day, some saw the Christian's refusal to honor the Roman gods as disloyalty to the state. Many Romans saw devotion to the gods as an expression of patriotism; those who refused to do so would be suspected of treason.

In that case Peter proposes a twofold course of action. First, believers are to "*Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts*", praising and blessing God no matter what hardships we might have to endure. Second, Christians should "*always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you*" (1 Pt 3:15). Believers should be able to articulate their faith with both clarity and charity. They should know how to express the teachings of the Gospel and how to do it in a positive way, with respect for those who question them.

Peter's vision of a suffering Church would be realized quickly enough. But although Christians were hated, persecuted and killed by pagan rulers, they still sought to live as good citizens. St. Justin the Philosopher emphasized this in his defense of his fellow Christians: "And everywhere we, more readily than all men, endeavor to pay to those appointed by you the taxes both ordinary and extraordinary as we have been taught by Him . . . Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment" (*Apologia* 17).

Witnesses with Peter

St. Peter concludes his letter with an exhortation to the presbyters of the Churches to whom he is writing. He identifies himself as a "*witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed*" (1 Pt 5:1). While Peter was an eye-witness to Christ's death and resurrection, we too are witnesses of these mysteries. Every Sunday at matins (orthros) we become icons of Peter's experience at Christ's tomb. We hear the Gospel of the Resurrection and

respond with the words “Now that we have seen the holy Resurrection of Christ…” We then partake of Christ in the Eucharist, anticipating the glory of the eternal heavenly banquet. We see with the eyes of faith what Peter saw with the eyes of the body: that Christ by His death and resurrection has made us sharers in the glory of His kingdom which will never end.

July 11 and 15 – Equals to the Apostles Olga and Vladimir

WHEN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICANS think of the Vikings, they may picture seafarers from Scandinavia sailing to Iceland and Greenland or raiding the coasts of England and Ireland. We rarely think of their inland cousins, whose rule extended into what is Russia today in the ninth to fourteenth centuries. Two of the saints commemorated this week were leaders of these “inland Vikings” who changed the face of Europe.

Beginning in AD 862 the Viking prince Rurik and his brothers established a network of states in the territory of today’s Romania, Ukraine and western Russia which came to be called Kievan Rus’. Around 945 the Grand Prince of Kiev, Igor, Rurik’s youngest son, was killed by rebellious Dravidian tribesmen. Igor’s wife, Olga (c. 890-969), avenged her husband by destroying the Dravidian towns and enslaving their leaders. Olga then ruled, first as regent on behalf of their young son. Sviatoslav. The young prince came of age in 962 but Olga was frequently in charge of Kiev thereafter during Sviatoslav’s military expeditions.

“Equal to the Apostles”

There had been some Christians in Kiev since the ninth century when St Photios the Great sent them a missionary bishop. The local governor Askold reputedly accepted the faith at that time. Olga became the first ruler of Kievan Rus’ to embrace Christianity. She was baptized in Constantinople in 957, taking the name Helena, and attempted to extend the Christian presence in Rus’. She is said to have built the churches of St. Nicholas over Askold’s grave and of the Holy Wisdom at Kiev (sites revered to this day), of the Annunciation at Vytebsk, and of the Holy Life-Creating Trinity at Pskov. She tried unsuccessfully to secure the appointment of a resident metropolitan for Kiev. Nor did she convince her son Sviatoslav to become a Christian. At first he tolerated the growing Christian presence in his realm for her sake, but later would destroy some of their churches, including ones she had built. It would be his son, Vladimir, himself raised by his grandmother, who would make of his realm a Christian nation.

Olga died on July 11, 969. In 1007, during the reign of her grandson Prince Vladimir, the relics of St Olga were transferred to the Desyatin Church of the Dormition in Kiev and placed in a special sarcophagus. She was the first woman canonized by the Russian Church. One of only five women saints proclaimed as Equal to the Apostles, she was so honored for her pioneering role in Slavic Christianity.

St. Vladimir the Great

Olga's grandson, Vladimir, was the third son of Sviatoslav, reportedly by his mother's servant, Malusha. In 969 Sviatoslav had given Kiev to his oldest son, Yaropolk, made his second son, Oleg, prince of the Drevlians, and placed Vladimir as prince of Novgorod while he was engaged in fighting the Bulgars. The brothers were soon engaged in fighting one another and Vladimir was driven from Novgorod by Yaropolk's forces. With help from his cousin Haakon, the ruler of Norway, Vladimir retook Novgorod, then marched on Kiev. In 978 he defeated his brother Yaropolk and became Grand Prince of all Kievan Rus' extending his rule throughout surrounding territories over the next few years.

The *Tale of Bygone Years*

In 1113 the Monk Nestor compiled a history of Kievan Rus' from AD 850 to 1110. Also known as the Russian Primary Chronicle, this work tells of the founding and early history of Kiev. Nestor relates how Vladimir adopted Christianity and suppressed the worship of the local gods at Kiev.

According to Nestor, "Vladimir summoned together his vassals and the city elders, and said to them: 'Behold, the Bulgars came before me urging me to accept their religion. Then came the Germans and praised their own faith; and after them came the Jews. Finally the Greeks appeared, criticizing all other faiths but commending their own, and they spoke at length, telling the history of the whole world from its beginning. Their words were artful, and it was wondrous to listen and pleasant to hear them."

The nobles urged Vladimir to send his own people to investigate the claims of these rival religions. On their return, they reported, "When we journeyed among the Bulgars, we beheld how they worship in their temple, called a mosque, while they stand ungirt. The Bulgarian bows, sits down, looks hither and thither like one possessed, and there is no happiness among them, but instead only sorrow and a dreadful stench. Their religion is not good.

"Then we went among the Germans, and saw them performing many ceremonies in their temples; but we beheld no glory there. Then we went on to Greece, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty. Every man, after tasting something sweet, is afterward unwilling to accept that which is bitter, and therefore we cannot dwell longer here.

"Then the vassals spoke and said, 'If the Greek faith were evil, it would not have been adopted by your grandmother Olga, who was wiser than all other men.'"

What had so impressed the Kievans? Nestor explained it this way: "On the morrow, the emperor sent a message to the patriarch to inform him that a Russian delegation had arrived to examine the Greek faith, and directed him to prepare the church and the clergy, and to array himself in his sacerdotal robes, so that the Russians might behold the glory of the God of the Greeks. When the patriarch received these commands, he bade the clergy assemble, and they performed the customary rites. They burned incense, and the choirs sang hymns. The emperor accompanied the Russians to the church, and placed them in a wide space, calling their attention to the beauty of

the edifice, the chanting, and the offices of the hierarch and the ministry of the deacons, while he explained to them the worship of his God. The Russians were astonished, and in their wonder praised the Greek ceremonial."

In 988 Vladimir captured the Greek city of Kherson in the Crimea. Nestor reports that Vladimir threatened to march on Constantinople itself unless the emperor sent his sister to marry Vladimir. The emperor replied: "It is not meet for Christians to give in marriage to pagans. If you are baptized, you shall have her to wife, inherit the kingdom of God, and be our companion in the faith." Nestor reports that the princess urged Vladimir to be baptized if he wanted to be healed of a painful eye ailment. Vladimir accepted and was baptized by the Bishop of Kherson, taking the name Basil. Healed, Vladimir praised God saying, "I have now perceived the one true God." Many of his companions then accepted baptism as well.

On his return to Kiev Vladimir brought his nobles and retainers to baptism, beginning the Christianization of Kievan Rus' which continued throughout his reign. Vladimir died in 1015 and his relics were distributed among the churches and monasteries he had founded.

In the thirteenth century July 15 was set as St Vladimir's feast day to commemorate his intercession for the forces under Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky who defeated Swedish invaders on July 15, 1240.

Sunday between July 13 and 19 – The Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils

"Peter Has Spoken through Leo"

ON THREE SUNDAYS EACH YEAR Byzantine Churches commemorate the fathers of the seven great councils of the first millennium. The first ecumenical council (Nicaea I) is remembered on the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension and the seventh (Nicaea II) on the Sunday nearest to October 11. The first six councils are recalled together on the Sunday following July 13, the feast of the fourth council (Chalcedon).

Many Christian churches in America were founded by a pastor who had a Bible, a microphone and a conviction that God wanted him to preach. So he gathered a few followers (often his own relatives), rented space and scheduled services. Americans see nothing unusual in this – after all freedom of speech and individual initiative are hallmarks of the American way of doing things. Why not in the Church?

The historic Churches (those of the first centuries) saw things differently. Many of these Churches had, in fact, been founded by one of the Apostles or their co-workers. They emphasized that the Church is the Body of Christ, an organic unity of Head and members. Like St Paul, these Churches saw unity as a chief mark of the Church and an important part of their mission "*endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*" (Eph 4:3-6).

Still, the first centuries saw a number of teachers with competing doctrines arise in the Church. When they were not accepted by the leaders of a local Church, these teachers or their followers

formed their own rival groups. In some places these groups became more popular than the historic Church. Arians, for example, were prominent in Constantinople through much of the fourth century and in much of the West through the fifth.

The Importance of Councils

The council – whether a local or regional synod or an ecumenical assembly – reflects a basic understanding of Church in the Christian East. The Church is the "communion in the Holy Spirit," a community infused with the life-giving presence of the Spirit of God. Councils reflect this image of the Church as a community. The council is a true image of the Church when it is imbued with and dependent on the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Councils function on every level of Church life in the East. In the local Church, the eparchy, the primary council is the presbyterate which shares in the sacramental ministry of the bishop. Community councils involving deacons and the laity administer the temporal concerns of the eparchy and its parishes. Wider synods govern the life of patriarchates or metropolias. With the establishment of Christianity as the dominant faith in the Roman Empire, the ecumenical council was created.

Constantine's Solution

When Emperor Constantine accepted Christ and recognized the Church as an important structure in his empire, he faced the rivalry between these groups. In his quest for a strong and united Church, he called the first Ecumenical Council as a vehicle for unifying the teaching and practices of the empire. There had been councils before, of course, but always on regional levels. This council involved bishops from the entire empire (the *ecumene*) under Constantine's rule. All the bishops of the empire were called to participate in this and subsequent councils as successors of the Apostles, entrusted with the teaching ministry by Christ. Together the bishops speak to and for all the local Churches. The agreement of the bishops, ratified by the "Amen" of the faithful, expresses the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Constantine set a precedent which would be repeated several times during the first millennium. These councils are:

1. ***First Council of Nicaea*** (325) – Arians held that Christ was like the Father, but was not of the same essence. They believed Him to be the first of God's creatures. This council rejected Arianism and, in the Creed which it drafted, proclaimed Him as being "one in essence" with the Father. The council also recognized as first sees Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. It unified the celebration of Pascha and issued other canons regulating Church life.
2. ***First Council of Constantinople*** (381) – Macedonius was one of the rival bishops in Constantinople during the Arian controversy. His followers denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. In response this Council proclaimed the second part of the Creed ("and in the Holy Spirit…").
3. ***Council of Ephesus*** (431) – The question "How could Jesus be both God and Man?" was much debated in these centuries. Nestorius taught that Jesus was a man in whom the Logos

dwelt and therefore Mary could not be called "Theotokos." His chief opponent, Cyril of Alexandria, saw that, if Christ were not truly divine, He could not have united that Divinity to our humanity. This council endorsed Cyril's teaching and forbade the development of any further Creed.

4. ***Council of Chalcedon*** (451) – As Nestorius had lessened the reality of the Incarnation by emphasizing Christ's humanity, Eutyches, a disciple of Cyril, seemed to be minimizing His humanity. After several rival councils endorsed first one then the other approach, a new emperor, Marcian, summoned this council which endorsed the teaching of Leo, Pope of Rome, finding it compatible with the teaching of Cyril and Ephesus. The Fathers of this Council confessed that Christ was "unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably one in two natures." The Council also added the sees of Constantinople and Jerusalem to the principal sees recognized at Nicaea, constituting the "pentarchy" (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem).

The (Assyrian) Church of the East did not explicitly accept the Council of Ephesus and the Oriental Orthodox Churches have not recognized the Council of Chalcedon, resulting in schisms between these Churches and the Eastern Orthodox (Byzantine) and Roman Catholic Churches. Twentieth-century Agreed Statements between these Churches succeeded in expressing their teachings in a harmonious way, thereby eliminating the theological bases for their divisions.

5. ***Second Council of Constantinople*** (553) – Many felt that in his "Three Chapters," Theodore of Mopsuestia had paved the way for Nestorius' teachings. To assure the opponents of Chalcedon that the Greek and Latin Churches were firmly behind the Council of Ephesus, this Council condemned his and others' writings as having inspired Nestorius.
6. ***Third Council of Constantinople*** (680-681) – Attempts at reconciling the teachings of Cyril and Leo sought to stress the unity of God and man in Christ had given rise to two new theological trends. Monoenergism taught that Christ had but one energy. Monothelitism taught that He had only one will. This Council condemned both propositions as minimizing the fullness of Christ's humanity and divinity.
7. ***Second Council of Nicaea*** (787) – This Council justified the veneration of icons, based on the true humanity of Christ. If the Word truly became flesh, the Council Fathers reasoned, He could be painted.

Two different gatherings have been called the ***Fourth Council of Constantinople***. The first (869-870) confirmed the Seventh Council, requiring that the icon of Christ be venerated like the Gospel Book. Since it also deposed St Photios the Great as patriarch of Constantinople, the Greek Churches did not accept it. They give the title to a second council (879-880) which reinstated Photios (with the pope's blessing). They affirmed the Creed without the *filioque* and condemned those who "impose on it their own invented phrases." Since the decrees of this Council were promulgated as Roman Law by the Emperor after its minutes had been signed by the Five Patriarchs, some Orthodox consider this an Ecumenical Council.

The West continued to call its general synods Ecumenical Councils long after the fall of the Empire. The Orthodox Churches, although they recognize several important "Great and Holy Councils" as normative for the entire Church, do not call them Ecumenical Councils.

The Councils in Our Liturgy

The seven councils of the first millennium which we commemorate liturgically are particularly remembered for their role in clarifying the Church's teaching on the Trinity and the Incarnation, the basis of all other doctrines, in the face of numerous controversies in the now free Churches of the Roman Empire. The councils sought to render the teachings of these mysteries scattered through the New Testament in the precise terms of Greek philosophy current in the empire. They succeeded in doing so, but were not as successful in expressing these teachings in ways accessible to those Churches outside that culture. Thus the fifth-century Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon contributed to lasting divisions in the Churches of the East.

Besides the three Sundays of the Council Fathers mentioned above, our Church also commemorates each Council individually on the following dates:
January 23 – Constantinople III
May 22 – Constantinople I
May 29 – Nicaea I
July 16 - Chalcedon
July 25 – Constantinople II
September 9 – Ephesus
October 13 – Nicaea II

The Problem of Chalcedon

Like other councils, the Council of Chalcedon dealt with both theological and political issues. The main theological issue was how to express the mystery of Christ's incarnation in the face of the Monophysitism taught by Eutyches, an influential priest in Constantinople and a disciple of St Cyril of Alexandria. At its second session the Council adopted the concept "two natures in one Person," employed by Pope St. Leo the Great in a letter to Flavian, the archbishop of Constantinople. When the letter was read to the bishops, they replied, "*This is the faith of the fathers! This is the faith of the Apostles! So we all believe! Thus the Orthodox believe! Anathema to him who does not thus believe! Peter has spoken thus through Leo!***"** Leo's expression has been used in the Greek and Latin Churches ever since. Unfortunately, this term was the opposite of that used by St Cyril of Alexandria a generation earlier, describing the "one nature of the incarnate Word."

The theological problem was made even more complex by the political, however. The first Council at Nicaea has decreed that the foremost local Churches in the Empire would be Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. At Chalcedon the 500+ bishops present recalled that "*the fathers* [at an earlier council in Constantinople] *rightly accorded prerogatives to the see of older Rome, since that is an imperial city; and moved by the same purpose the 150 most devout bishops*

apportioned equal prerogatives to the most holy see of New Rome, reasonably judging that the city which is honored by the imperial power and senate and enjoying privileges equaling older imperial Rome, should also be elevated to her level in ecclesiastical affairs and take second place after her." Thus Constantinople (New Rome) was accorded the second place in the hierarchy previously held by Alexandria.

The Pope of Rome, St Leo the Great, at first objected to this realignment as contrary to the canons of Nicaea I but he later relented and it became law in the empire. The Churches of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and – because it was the site of the Lord's death and resurrection – Jerusalem would be the foremost local Churches in the empire. This group of five sees would be known as the *pentarchy* and their ranking is recognized in the Byzantine Churches to this day.

Thus not only was Roman theological terminology deemed more precise than Alexandrian, the Byzantine see was given precedence over that of Alexandria. The Alexandrian bishops at first delayed and finally refused to accept the decrees of this council and the Egyptian Church was divided into Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian parts. Those who accepted Chalcedon were called "Melkites" or Royalists; those who did not called themselves "Copts," i.e. true Egyptians.

The Copts would later be joined by the Armenians and many Syriac-speaking members of the Patriarchate of Antioch. Along with their daughter Churches in Ethiopia and India, the non-Chalcedonians are today known as the "Oriental Orthodox Churches."

A New Chapter

These divisions were hardened in the thousand years of Islamic rule in the Middle East. Each Christian group – Melkite, Nestorian and non-Chalcedonian – was designated a separate *millet* (nation), with its own laws, insuring that the Christians remained disunited.

It was only with the end of the Ottoman Empire in World War I that these Churches embarked on a new way of interacting. In 1988 the Coptic Orthodox and the Catholic Churches issued an Agreed Statement on the Incarnation. It said in part, "*We believe that our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, the Incarnate-Logos, is perfect in His Divinity and perfect in His Humanity. He made His Humanity One with His Divinity without Mixture, nor Mingling, nor Confusion. His Divinity was not separated from His humanity even for a moment or twinkling of an eye*."

This was followed in 1990 by an Agreed Statement between the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. "*The* [Chalcedonian] *Orthodox agree that the Oriental Orthodox will continue to maintain their traditional cyrillian terminology of 'one nature of the incarnate Logos,' since they acknowledge the double consubstantiality of the Logos which Eutyches denied. The Orthodox also use this terminology. The Oriental Orthodox agree that the Orthodox are justified in their use of the two-natures formula, since they acknowledge that the distinction is 'in thought alone'*."

Finally, over 1500 years after Chalcedon, the Latin, Greek and Oriental Churches have come to recognize their common faith in the perfect humanity and divinity of Christ, despite the differing terminology they use to express it.

Radiating the Light of Christ (Mt 5:14-19)

WE CAN SAY THAT THE GOSPELS are woven around a string of images describing rather than defining how Christ relates to us. Some of these images are drawn from the temple worship ("the Lamb of God" – Jn 1:29). Others are taken from the history of Israel ("the bread which came down from heaven" – Jn 6:51) or the writings of the prophets ("the Son of Man" – Dan 7:13). There are agricultural images ("I am the vine" – Jn 15:5) and images drawn from sheepherding ("I am the good shepherd" – Jn 10:11). Of all these images none is more basic to human life as it was lived then than images of light and darkness.

Christ as Light

The Lord refers to Himself as our light: "*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life*" (Jn 8:12). "*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world*" (Jn 9:5). As light He is our guide, enabling us to see the truth of God in a dark world.

But light is more than an image of Christ as our guide; it is in some way who Christ is in Himself. When He was transfigured on Mount Tabor the Lord Jesus was manifested as light. As Matthew describes it, "*His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light*" (Mt 17:2). Mark adds, "*His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them*" (Mk 9:3). Luke describes this as "*His glory*" (Lk 9:32), a term that in Scripture suggests divinity.

This experience of Christ's transfiguration has been understood in the Christian East as manifesting something of Christ's deepest self. They saw this light on Mount Tabor as the divine energies of Christ revealed for our sake. As several Fathers described it, these energies are like the rays of the sun: not the sun itself (God's inmost essence) but inseparable from it.

The Church took up this identification of Christ as light into the liturgy. One of the earliest examples is the vesper hymn to Christ as the "Radiant Light of the holy glory of the immortal Father." First recorded in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, this is the oldest hymn apart from the psalms still used in the Church.

The Lord Jesus is also glorified as light in a number of other liturgical prayers, such as:
The Prayer of the First Hour – "O Christ, true Light enlightening everyone who comes into the world…"
The Liturgy of the Presanctified – "The light of Christ enlightens all mankind"
Troparion of the Transfiguration – "Let Your eternal light shine also upon us sinners."
The Mystery of Holy Illumination – The foremost expression of Christ as our light in the liturgy is, of course, holy baptism. Thus the newly-illumined is clothed with a white garment, called the "Robe of light," symbol of the baptized's union with Christ.

How Does Christ Enlighten Us?

In Eastern Christian thought Christ first of all enlightens us by making God manifest to us. It is through Christ that the knowledge of the Holy Trinity came to be known. As we say repeatedly in the Divine Liturgy, "We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity…"

While this revelation climaxed in the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it was revealed in part during Christ's earthly life as well. After Christ's resurrection His disciples came to understand that the Father and His Son were one in a unique way, a way which we see proclaimed in the prologue to John's Gospel: "*No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known*" (Jn 1:18).

The mystery of Christ as Son of God was not imparted as information, but through experience. The disciples came to know that Christ was one with the Father by sharing His life. At the conclusion of their time with Him, just before His arrest, the result of their lived experience became clear. "*His disciples said to Him, 'See, now You are speaking plainly, and using no figure of speech! Now we are sure that You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came forth from God"*" (Jn 16: 29, 30).

In the same way the Holy Spirit was revealed to the disciples through their experience of receiving Him. The Spirit, in turn, illumined them to understand "the mystery which was hidden from eternity and unknown to the angels" – God's plan to renew creation in Christ.

Later Christians would describe the relationship of the Father and the Son as the mystery of the Trinity and see Christ's greatest teaching as the revelation of that mystery. In the exaposteilarion of the Transfiguration our Church proclaims its faith that Christ is the Light who reveals the Holy Trinity to the world. "O Word, un-transformable Light, the Light of the unborn Father, by Your light which has shown today on Tabor, we have seen the Father's light and the Spirit's light, illumining the whole creation."

Believers as Light

Towards the end of the Lord Jesus' earthly ministry He said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (Jn 9:5). This gives us the context of what He had told His hearers, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16). After His ascension it would be the disciples whose good works would draw those around them to glorify God.

While Christ is the Light in the truest sense, those who are in Christ shine with a kind of reflected light due to their union with Him. We reflect the light of Christ when we too manifest God and His love for mankind through the way we live.

The icon is a familiar pointer to this truth for us. An icon glows with a reflected light when a lamp or candle is lit before it. The lamp is the source of the light, but it is the icon which attracts us. Similarly people will be attracted to the divine Light when they see it reflected in the lives of believers.

Perhaps the most important way of reflecting the light of Christ is by being present to those who are struggling with the darkness of confusion and despair. There words are not necessary – and perhaps even counterproductive. Simply by being present to the fearful can we reflect the light of Christ who is the Lover of Mankind.

In the Darkness of Life

Like a child left alone in the dark, I cry out to You, Son of David, taking refuge in the shadow of Your wings until the storms of destruction pass by. Though my soul is among lions who roar out that there is no salvation for me, my heart is steadfast and I sing these praises:
JESUS, sight for the blind!
JESUS, wealth for the beggar!
JESUS, harbor for those assailed by storms!
JESUS, fortress for all who are besieged!
JESUS, Your glory is above the heavens!
JESUS, Your radiance fills the earth!
JESUS, exaltation of the transcendent Father!
JESUS, bestower of the life-giving Spirit!
JESUS, hear my cry when all others are deaf!
JESUS, call me to Your throne and save me!
JESUS, bottomless ocean of mercy!
JESUS, infinite firmament of truth!
JESUS, light to those in darkness, glory to You!

Akathist to Christ, Light to Those in Darkness

July 20 – The Holy Prophet Elias the Thisbite

The Pillar of the Prophets

THE SCRIPTURES ARE FILLED with writings of the prophets, particularly the fifteen books named after the most celebrated Hebrew prophets. Nevertheless, the one most revered as "the pillar of the prophets and their leader" (aposticha) seems to have written nothing, except a letter to King Jehoram of Israel, which was delivered sometime after the prophet had left this world (see 2 Chron 21:10-12).

Elijah (Elias) the Thisbite lived in the ninth century BC, in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab. Five hundred years had passed since Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Several generations had come and gone since David and Solomon ruled in God's name. Their kingdom had been divided in two and thereby weakened by rivalries among its leaders. The Israelites had grown lax in their conviction that there was but one God. Proximity to and intermarriage with neighboring Canaanites had made them more accepting of these other gods, such as Baal, favorite of the king's wife, Jezebel. The dramatic story of Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal is recorded in 1 Kings 17-19.

Elijah – whose name means "Yahweh is my God" – personifies the most important characteristic of the Hebrew prophets. He is described repeatedly as consumed by zeal for the LORD, devoted

to observing and restoring the worship of the one true God in a spiritually feeble age. The commitment of the Israelites to their God would wax and wane over succeeding generations and other prophets would rise up to do as Elijah had done in his day to exalt the name of the one true God.

Elijah the Wonderworker

The Scriptures recount several marvels in the life of Elijah for which he is especially revered. The most dramatic involves the drought brought about by the prophet who warned the king, "*There will be no dew or rain except at my bidding*" (1 Kgs 17:1). The three-year long drought was ended at Elijah's prayer, after the prophets of Baal had failed to do so, bringing about the conversion of the people to the LORD. "*When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: 'THE LORD alone is God! THE LORD alone is God!'*" (1 Kgs 18:39).

A series of wonders took place in Zarephath, a village near Sidon. There Elijah multiplied flour and oil for a poor widow so that "*she and her household had food for a long time*" (1 Kgs 17:15).

Elijah also restored the widow's son to life after a fatal illness had claimed him by prostrating himself three times over the child and praying, "*O LORD, let this child's life return to his body*" (1 Kgs 17:21). St Ephrem the Syrian would see this triple prostration as an image of Christ's triple descent (to becoming man, to death, and to Hades) in order to bring life to the human race.

Elijah the Ascetic

Monastics in the Christian East have long revered Elijah as a kind of proto-monk, a desert-dweller for the Lord. During the drought God sent Elijah east of the Jordan to Wadi Cherith, a secluded ravine out of Ahab's reach where "*ravens brought him bread and meat morning and evening, and he drank from the river*" (1 Kgs 17:6). Modern commentators have noted that the original Hebrew text has no vowels and that the same consonants in the word *ravens* can also be read as *Arabs*. Perhaps Bedouin tribesmen brought food to Elijah in his wilderness retreat as their descendants would assist hermits in later centuries.

Monastics also identified with Elijah's forty-day fast on his journey to Mount Horeb (see 1 Kgs 19:8). At the conclusion of this fast the LORD revealed His presence to Elijah in "*a still, small voice*" (1 Kgs 19:12). This they saw as an icon of the monastic life. The monk distances himself from the world through fasting and other ascetic practices to pursue communion with God (*theosis*).

Elijah and Mount Carmel

Several events in the life of the prophet Elijah are connected with Mount Carmel, a promontory on the Mediterranean near the city of Haifa. Christians, Druze, Jews and Muslims all revere this place for its connection with Elijah. Early in the spread of monasticism ascetics settled in the area, often living in caves on the outcropping.

When Western monks came to the Holy Land during the Crusades, they found Eastern hermits settled on Carmel and stayed among them. The Western monks adopted the Easterners' way of

life in the spirit of Elijah. When they returned to Europe, however, these "Carmelites" were obliged to adopt a communal way of life. While living as a hermit was considered the summit of monastic life in the East, it was seen as eccentric in the West.

Elijah's Return

The last Old Testament prophetic book, Malachi, ends with these words of the LORD: "*Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction*" (Mal 3:23-24). Believing Jews saw Elijah's return as a herald of the Messiah's coming. To this day Jews pray every Sabbath: "Elijah the prophet, Elijah the Thisbite – let him come quickly in our day with the Messiah, the son of David."

Christians, of course, believe that the Messiah *has* come – it is Jesus. Jesus Himself identified John the Baptist as Elijah come again: "*If you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come*" (Mt 11:14). But Christians also believe that Elijah is "the herald of the Second Coming of Christ" (aposticha): the coming in power at the end of the age.

In 2 Kgs 2:11 we read "*And it came to pass while they* [Elijah and Elisha] *were walking, speaking together as they walked, behold, a chariot of fire came between the two of them and Elijah was swept up in a whirlwind…*" The current Hebrew text, on which most modern translations are based, says that Elijah was swept up "*into heaven*." The oldest existing text, however, the Greek Septuagint, says that he was swept up "***as if*** *into heaven*." This accords with the statement in the Gospel of John, "*No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven*" (Jn 3:13).

Jewish commentaries describe heaven as the dwelling place of the angels. Christians, however, see heaven as the state of intimate communion with God: something made possible only after Christ. Thus St Athanasius would write, "Elijah did not ascend into heaven… Heaven was reserved for the Creator, the Author of mankind. Thus, with Enoch and Elijah, God gladdened the people with a promising hope by spreading before them an 'airborne highway' as though for horse-drawn vehicles" (Homily 2 on the Ascension). As St. Gregory mused concerning Enoch and Elijah, "…even he [Elijah] did not go beyond the boundaries of the earth, but who knows what kind of transportation each of these ascensions was, which lifted them off the face of the earth, yet did not remove them from earth altogether" (Homily 1 on the Ascension).

July 22 – The Equal to the Apostles, Mary Magdalene

WHEN WE THINK OF THE PEOPLE who appear in the Gospels we think first of all of Christ and His Mother, then perhaps of John the Forerunner and the apostles. But there is another figure who is more prominent both in the Gospels and in the life of the Church than even some of the apostles – St Mary Magdalene whom the Eastern Churches call the "equal-to-the- apostles."

Mary Magdalene in the Gospels

The Scriptures have little to say about Mary; this has not prevented speculations and often erroneous conclusions to be made from the early centuries up to our own day. The Gospels tell us that:

a) According to her name ***she was from Magdala***, a village on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, near Tiberias. Because she was known by her hometown rather than by the name of her husband, father or son, it is assumed she was unmarried.

b)She was ***one of the Lord's traveling companions***. "*He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with Him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities—Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance"* (Lk 8:1-3).

From this passage, some have deduced that Mary was well-to-do. The Gospel text does not necessarily imply that Mary was one of those who provided for Jesus from their own resources. That phrase may only refer to the unnamed "others."

The Gospels do not describe Mary's healing and many have speculated about it. Pope Gregory I (c. 540-604), for example, equated these demons with the spiritual assaults within us: "And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the passions?" He thus contributed to the opinion that Mary was a great sinner, even a prostitute.

This idea came from a mistaken reading of the passage from Luke quoted above. The passage before it tells of an unnamed "*woman in the city who was a sinner*" (Lk 7:37) who washed Jesus feet with her tears. Commentators connected these two passages, believing they were about the same woman, which the Gospel itself does not imply.

*c)****Mary was one of the women who stayed near Jesus at the cross*** when His chosen disciples all ran away: "*Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene*" (Jn 19:25).

*d)*Most importantly, as all four Gospels relate, ***she was present at the tomb,*** the first person to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection and the first to alert the apostles to the news of the resurrection: "*Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him'"* (Jn 20:1, 2).

As Luke tells it, Mary Magdalene was there with Joanna and Mary (the mother of James) when "*...behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'" And they remembered His words. Then they returned*

from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest… And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them" (Lk 24:4-11).

Reflecting on the Resurrection Gospels, Gregory the Great thought it fitting that "because in Paradise a woman offered death to a man, at the tomb a woman announced life to men" *(49th Homily on the Gospels*). Doing the same, the ninth-century archbishop of Mainz, Rabanus Maurus, called Mary Magdalene the "apostle to the apostles." This title became common in the West during the centuries that followed.

Mary and the Red Eggs

As was common in the second and third centuries, there were Christian attempts to tell the stories of what happened to the New Testament figures after the events described in the Scriptures. In several of these stories Mary Magdalene is said to have traveled to Rome and shared her witness to Christ with the first believers there.

While in Rome she is said to have attended a dinner at which Emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37) was present. When she spoke about Christ's resurrection, according to one version of this story, Tiberius laughed, saying that a man rising from the dead was no more possible than these eggs turning red before our eyes. The eggs did, in fact, turn red and Eastern Christians have been blessing red eggs on Pascha ever since.

Modestos, patriarch of Jerusalem (630-634) wrote, in his On the Myrrhbearers, that Mary Magdalene returned to Jerusalem, where she lived with Theotokos until her dormition. After the death of the Theotokos, Mary Magdalene went to Ephesus where she spent the rest of her life.

Her tomb outside the city was described by Gregory of Tours (538-594) in his *De Miraculis*. Gregory had not seen the tomb himself, but was recounting the testimony of an unnamed "Syrian traveler." Her holy relics were transferred in the ninth century to Constantinople, and placed in the monastery Church of Saint Lazarus. In the era of the Crusader campaigns they were taken to Italy and placed at Rome under the altar of the Lateran Cathedral. Her incorrupt hand is preserved in the Simonopetra Monastery on Mt Athos.

According to a later Western tradition Mary Magdalene had gone to the south of France where she was said to have spent her last years alone in the wilderness, fasting and engaging in acts of penitential self-discipline to atone for the "sins" of her early life. Her relics are supposedly kept in Provage, near Marseilles. This tradition is clearly based on the erroneous identification of Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of Lk 7, described above.

Mis-directions in the Story of Mary

Besides Mary Magdalene and the Theotokos the Gospels also mention other Marys: Mary of Bethany (the sister of Lazarus and Martha), and Mary the mother of James. This led to a confusion in the West between Mary Magdalen (identified as the sinner of Lk 7) and these other Marys. This identification, which had never been accepted in the East, was finally rejected in the 1969 revision of the General Roman Calendar.

In the first centuries after Christ several groups developed their own "gospels" weaving the story of Jesus with their own teachings. Several of these, from gnostic sources, were discovered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In several of them Mary Magdalen is depicted as Jesus' favorite companion, making the apostles jealous. These works gave rise to modern pseudo-historical attempts to say that Mary was Jesus' wife or mistress.

July 24 –The Great Martyr Christina of Tyre

AMONG THE MANY MARTYRS commemorated in the Byzantine Churches, some are given the added designation Great (or Megalo-) Martyr. What makes one martyr "great" in contrast to the others?

In general the term "Great Martyr" refers to the leading martyrs who suffered during the Age of Roman Persecutions, before the Edict of Milan (313) officially ended the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. They were widely revered for their courageous witness in the face of severe torments and were widely venerated in Churches throughout the empire.

Among these Great Martyrs are the soldier-saints George (April 2), Dimitrios (October 26), Theodore the Commander (February 8), Theodore the Recruit (February 17), Phanourios of Rhodes (August 27) and Procopios of Scythopolis (July 7). As agents of the Roman Empire, soldiers were subjected to particularly brutal tortures when they refused to honor the Roman gods.

There are a number of women martyrs who have been given this title as well. In societies where women were expected to obey men without question, those women who preferred to follow Christ rather than their husband, father or ruler were singled out for torture with particular zeal, often by members of their own families. Saints Catherine of Alexandria, Barbara, Euphemia, Irene and Paraskevi, as well as St Christina of Tyre, are among the women from this era revered as Great Martyr in the Byzantine Churches.

Where Is Tyre?

A leading maritime and mercantile center since Phoenician times, Tyre was also known for developing a particularly precious dye, Tyrian purple, which was often reserved for the use of the aristocracy. Under Rome since 64 BC, Tyre was a semi-independent federated city, a sign of its prominence in the region.

There have been Christians in Tyre since the time of Christ Himself who healed the daughter of a woman whom Mark calls "*a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth*" (Mk 7:24). St Paul passed through the city on his way back to Jerusalem and, "*Finding disciples, we stayed there seven days*" (Acts 21:4).

The principal religious center of the city in Roman days, however, was the temple of Heracles, the son of Zeus, identified as "Tyrian Heracles." Scholars today consider this god to be a hellenized version of the even older Phoenician deity, Melkart, the *Ba'al Sur*, (Lord of Tyre), worshipped there for a thousand years before Rome ruled the area.

A Lebanese city of some 125,000 today, Tyre is the proto-throne of the Melkite patriarchate. Its archbishop is second in rank to the patriarch of Antioch.

St. Christina of Tyre

We do not know precisely when St Christina was born, only that she lived and died in the middle of the third century. Neither do we know her given name – the name "Christina" (little Christ or anointed one) was given by believers who witnessed her martyrdom. She was the daughter of a high ranking pagan official – some say he was the "urban prefect" or governor of the city. Others mistakenly identify him with Urbanus, the governor of the Palestine and Phoenicia who was a fierce persecutor of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century.

According to the tradition *Life* of this saint, the child blossomed into a beautiful young woman who had many men seeking her hand. Her father kept her secluded with several maidservant-companions because he had other plans for her: he wanted her to serve as a priestess, presumably in the temple of Tyrian Heracles.

In Greek mythology Herakles had intercourse in a single night with the fifty daughters of Thestios, except for one who refused to have him. Herakles, thinking that he had been insulted, condemned her to remain a virgin all her life, serving him as his priest. Thus the priestess in the temple of Heracles was always a life-long virgin.

Despite her father's plans, Christina learned about the Christian faith in the one true God. Some versions of her life say that she was taught by an angel, others by the Holy Spirit Himself. All agree that her journey to faith began through her meditations on the beauty of creation. Her father had placed idols of Roman gods in her quarters. Christina came to believe that no idol could have created the universe since they themselves were the work of human hands. She destroyed the idols and prayed that the true God might reveal Himself to her.

When her father learned that she was not offering sacrifices to the Roman gods he tried to persuade her to do so, lest she anger them and bring down their wrath on the family. When his words failed to change Christina's mind her father resorted to beating her into submission. When that did not succeed either, he had her imprisoned and tortured further, but Christina would not relent. Christina's mother pleaded with her to obey her father for the family's sake but the girl was adamant. As we pray in the service of this feast, "You spurned your impious father; and loving the Jerusalem on high as your mother, you rejected your mother's overweening love…"

Christina remained in prison during the rule of two successive prefects, Zienus and Julian. Finally she died from a volley of arrows shot by the governor's troops.

St Christina's Relics

St Christina's remains were buried by an uncle. Devotion to her spread beyond Tyre and at an unknown date her relics were brought from Tyre to Constantinople and enshrined in a church dedicated to her near the imperial palace. This church's throne feast was kept on July 24, the date observed in honor of this saint both in Eastern and Western Churches.

During the Crusader sack of Constantinople in the thirteenth century the relics were taken to Italy and housed first in Torcello, then Murano and, finally, Venice. They are now said to rest in the Church of St Francis "della Vigna" ("in the vineyard"), in Venice. The cathedral of Palermo also claims her remains, but these relics may be those of St Christina of Bolsena, often confused in the West with St Christina of Tyre.

Discovering God Through Creation

St Christina's discovery of God through creation is also the experience of others, both in the ancient world and today. Marjorie Corbman, raised in a secular Jewish family, joined many of her generation in nature-worship while in junior high school. Here she describes how she moved to worship of the Creator.

"One of the truest things I ever read was the oft-quoted passage in Augustine's *Confessions*: 'When I asked the earth, it responded: *I am not God*. When I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, they said: *Nor are we the God you seek*. I said, '*Speak to me of my God.* Loudly they exclaimed: *It is He who made us.* The heavens, the earth and everything that is in them tell me to love You.' When I read this I stared at the words with a simple joy, knowing that this was exactly what had happened to me. Nature had been my answer – and my generation's answer – to the stifling reality of human evil, of artificiality, of the modern age. And nature's answer to me had been God" (*A Tiny Step Away from Deepest Faith*, p. 45).

July 25 – The Dormition of St Anne

AT EVERY DIVINE LITURGY as well as at Vespers and Matins (Orthros) the priest mentions in the dismissal "the holy ancestors of God Joachim and Anne." They are Christ's ancestors because they are the parents of the Theotokos: not just His ancestors but His only grandparents – the mother and father of the Theotokos.

The Gospels make no mention of the Virgin's mother and father, so where do we first hear about them? Their story is told in the second-century *Protoevangelium of James*, sometimes called the *Birth of Mary*, the *Gospel of James* or his *Infancy Gospel*. According to the text itself, this work was authored in Jerusalem by James, the Brother of the Lord (cf. Protoevangelium 25:1). Many commentators, however, beginning with Origen, have seen it as a later composition. A number of scholars today feel that the version we have was written around AD 120-145.

Widely known in the early Church, the *Protoevangelium of James* is a kind of prequel to the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. It describes the birth of the holy Virgin, her perpetual virginity and her betrothal to Joseph, the father of James and his brothers, as well as offering some explanations of the annunciation, the birth of Christ and the massacre of the innocents not

found in the canonical New Testament. Like the Gospel infancy narratives it contains midrashic devices designed to teach dogmatic truths through stories.

The Protoevangelium begins by citing "the histories of the twelve tribes of Israel" (1:1) which tell about a certain Joachim who was reproached by another Jew for not having children. To this day Orthodox Jews are expected to have children in order to continue their lineage and also on the chance of giving birth to the Messiah. Joachim was troubled and fasted in the desert for forty days and nights, saying: "I will not go down either to eat or drink until the Lord my God visit me. Prayer shall be my food and drink" (1.2).

Anne (in Hebrew Hannah or "grace"), lamenting her childlessness and seeming widowhood, isolated herself from her neighbors. Then "an angel of the Lord appeared, saying unto her: 'Anne, Anne, the Lord has heard your prayer. You shall conceive and bear a child who shall be spoken of in the whole world'" (4:1).

Joachim was also visited by an angel who sent him home with the news that Anne was going to conceive a child. When Joachim arrived Anne "ran and hung upon his neck, saying: 'Now I know that the Lord God has greatly blessed me: for behold, I am no longer a widow or childless'" (4:4).

Joachim and Anne figure once more in the *Protoevangelium*, when they presented their daughter in the Temple. The remainder of this work is concerned with the betrothal of the Virgin to Joseph when she was twelve years old, the annunciation, the birth of Christ and the flight into Egypt. Joachim and Anne are out of the picture by then.

The Feasts of St Anne

Our liturgical calendar includes three feasts of St. Anne. On December 9 we celebrate the Maternity of St Anne, recalling her conception of the Theotokos. Our icon for the feast depicts Joachim and Anne embracing at the door of their house, the scene from the *Protoevangelium* cited above.

On September 9 the day after Mary's Nativity, we observe a *synaxis* (liturgical gathering) in honor of her parents. The second day of a Great Feast often celebrates those closely associated with the event remembered on the feast itself.

On July 25 we recall the Dormition (or falling asleep) of St Anne. We sometimes associate the word *Dormition* with the Virgin Mary exclusively, but this is a misunderstanding. Most saint's days are observed on the day of their death (dormition) because it is their "heavenly birthday," the day on which they entered eternal life. The term dormition usually occurs in the title of the feast only when the saint has a number of commemorations during the year.

The Feast of St. Anne's Dormition dates from the fifth century when a shrine was built in her honor in Constantinople. The feast became popular in the West beginning in the thirteenth century. There it is kept on July 26, because the feast of St James the Apostle was already observed on the 25th.

From the Canon of St Anne's Dormition

She who had been named for "grace" has passed on to that divine Joy conceived without seed by her spotless daughter. As she stands confidently by Christ, she intercedes for our salvation.

Having lived a blameless life, you gave birth to the Virgin Theotokos who blamelessly conceived the Word of the Father; and you have gone to Him in glory, truly divinized by your communion with God.

Shining with the radiant light of your divine virtues, you have departed today to the eternal Light of life. Thus, as is right, we call you blessed.

The mother of the Mother of God, the barren one who became the grandmother of Christ, is stripped of life as she was once stripped of sterility; and she cries aloud in the land of the living, "O works of the Lord, praise and exalt Him above all forever."

July 27 – The Great Martyr and Unmercenary Healer St Panteleimon

Jewel of the Martyrs

FEW CHRISTIANS HAVE NOT HEARD of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. After living in India for twenty years, teaching in a (middle class) girls high school, she received what she termed "a call within a call" to devote the rest of her life to caring for the sick poor while living among them. At her death there were over 4500 sisters in the religious community she founded.

Mother Teresa is a modern example of what our Tradition calls "Unmercenary Healers," people – usually physicians – who cared for the sick without pay, offering their skills back to God as their sacrifice of praise. The troparion usually sung in honor of these Unmercenaries speaks of them living out the command of Christ to the Twelve, "*Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give*" (Mt 10:8).

Then, as now, physicians were respected members of society and expected to be remunerated for their services, which is why the sick poor were often ignored in the ancient world. The Unmercenary Healers were the exception to this rule.

Unmercenary Healers

The Eastern Churches have, for centuries, honored a number of Unmercenaries, several of whom were also martyrs in the early persecutions. A few of them (and their feast days) are:

Ss. Cosmas and Damian of Asia Minor (November 1),

Ss. Cosmas and Damian of Rome (July 1),

Ss. Cyrus and John in Egypt (January 31),

St Julian in Homs, Syria (February 6),

and the teenaged medical student ***St Thallaios*** (May 20).

Some Unmercenaries were not trained physicians but rather native healers, usually associated with rural areas and practicing what we might call "alternative medicine" today. Among them we venerate:

St Tryphon (February 1) who healed livestock as well as people in his village, Lampsacos.

Not a few of these Unmercenaries were women. Among them the Church honors:

Ss. Zenaida and Philonella (October 11), who operated a clinic at a healing spring in Thessaly, and

the precursors of Mother Teresa, ***Ss. Hermione and Eukhidia*** (September 4), who established the first hostel for the homeless poor in Ephesus.

These and others are also remembered in a collective feasts of the Holy Unmercenaries in the calendars of some local Churches, generally in October or November.

The Great Martyr St. Panteleimon

One of the most revered Unmercenaries in both East and West is the Great Martyr St. Panteleimon the Healer. He lived in Asia Minor from 274 to 304 and was thus a contemporary of St. George and other martyrs. Like them he suffered martyrdom in the same persecution.

Our saint was born in Nicemedia, the regional capital, about the year 274 to a pagan father, Eusturgios, and a Christian mother, Eubula. At birth he was given the name Pantaleon, which means "in all things like a lion." His mother began teaching him the Christian faith but she died when her son was still a boy. Raised by his father, Pantaleon was taught to join him in worshiping the ancestral gods of the region.

The highly intelligent lad was entrusted as a teenager to the noted physician Euphrosinos to learn the practice of medicine. As was the custom, he accompanied his master everywhere to study his methods. Since Euphrosinos was occasionally called to the imperial court Pantaleon attracted the attention of the Eastern emperor, Maximian. He successfully completed his studies and began the practice of medicine himself.

Pantaleon's Conversion

The young physician often passed a house where three priests – Hermolaos, Hermippos and Hermocrates – were living in seclusion. They had survived a notorious massacre in 303 when thousands of Christians, who had taken refuge in the principal church in Nicomedia, were slaughtered. Hermolaos noticed him and invited him in. In the course of what became frequent conversations, Hermolaos praised Pantaleon for his skills, but also challenged him: "But, my friend, of what use are all your acquisitions in this art, since you are ignorant of the science of salvation?"

Pantaleon was well disposed to Hermolaos' teaching, but was only convinced to accept baptism through the following event. The young physician once happened to see a child stricken on the street, bitten by a poisonous snake. Pantaleon began to pray to our Lord Jesus Christ that the dead child might be revived and that the poisonous reptile might die. He firmly resolved that, should his prayers be answered, he would become a follower of Christ and would accept baptism. Pantaleon saw the child come back to life and the great viper burst into pieces. Pantaleon was then baptized be Hermolaos and was given the name Pantaleimon ("all-compassionate").

Pantaleimon began urging his father, Eustorgios, to accept Christ. When Eustorgios saw his son heal a blind man by invoking the name of Christ, he came to believe and was baptized, along with the man who had regained his sight.

After Eustorgios' death, Pantaleimon dedicated his life to the suffering, sick, needy and indigent. Everyone who came to him he treated without charge, healing them by invoking Jesus Christ. He would visit those in prison, especially Christians, whose numbers were filling the prisons, and treat their wounds, thus living up to his Christian name. This naturally attracted the attention of people and they abandoned their other physicians to be treated by Panteleimon.

The other physicians reacted by denouncing Panteleimon as a Christian. Maximian urged Panteleimon to refute the charge by offering sacrifice to the Roman gods, but he refused. On the contrary, Panteleimon healed a paralyzed man in the emperor's presence by invoking Christ. Maximian dismissed this as some kind of trick and condemned Pantaleimon to death. He suffered martyrdom, along with the three priests who had befriended him, on July 27, 304.

Imitating the mercy of God, O Pantaleimon, you deserve your name which corresponds to the nature of your deeds, for you showed mercy to all, granting them a double healing. You calm them and care for their sufferings while you lead them to the divine and radiant knowledge of Christ.

Sticheron at the Praises of Orthros

August 1 to 14 – Fast of the Theotokos

SUMMER, IN OUR WORLD AT LEAST, is a time for sun and fun: cookouts, the beach, pool parties, and the like. Yet in the midst of summer – in the week which has been compared to the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning –we are called to fast. The first two weeks of August are observed in the Byzantine Churches as the Fast of the Theotokos, in preparation for the Feast of her Dormition on August 15.

In the early Church the Dormition Fast was generally observed in both East and West. Pope St. Leo the Great mentioned it in the mid-fifth century in connection with the seasons of the year: "The Church fasts are situated in the year in such a way that a special abstinence is prescribed for each time. Thus, for spring there is the spring fast, the Forty Days [Great Lent]; for summer there is the summer fast… [the Apostles' Fast]; for autumn there is the autumn fast, in the seventh month [Dormition Fast]; for winter there is the winter fast [Nativity Fast]."

Today the Coptic, Malankara, and Syriac Churches, as well as the Byzantine, continue to observe this 14-day fast period. In the Armenian and Maronite traditions the Fast lasts for one week rather than two. In the traditional calendar of the Roman Church, August 14 is observed as a day of fasting in preparation for this feast.

This Fast period is one of several aspects of this celebration which has earned it the title of the "summer Pascha," a feast pointing to the ultimate resurrection of all flesh at the last day. Just as the feast of Christ's resurrection is paired with the feast of the Annunciation (March 25), the Dormition is paired with the feast of Christ's Holy Transfiguration (August 6). As Pascha is preceded by the Holy Friday evening observance of the Burial of Christ, the Dormition is marked in many places by a comparable burial service for the Theotokos when lamentations patterned after the Holy Week hymns are sung. In some places a burial shroud (epitaphios) with the image of the Dormition is carried in procession as well.

The Paraclisis to theTheotokos

In the Byzantine Churches of the Mediterranean world the most prominent feature of the Dormition Fast is the celebration of the Paraclisis to the Theotokos, a service invoking the Virgin's intercession for those we commemorate during the service. It is said that, as the Virgin sensed her approaching death, she prayed continually for her Son's disciples and for those who would believe their message. And so, as the feast of her Dormition draws near, we ask her prayers for our Church and our loved ones with a similar intensity.

The Paraclisis to the Theotokos is patterned in part on Orthros (Matins), There is an opening psalm, troparia, a Gospel reading, and a canon, concluding with an incensing of the whole church and a solemn veneration of the Virgin's icon. Intercessory litanies for those whom we are commemorating are interspersed throughout the service.

There are actually two canons used which give their names to the service as a whole. The Small Paraclisis includes the older canon, composed in the ninth century by Theosterictus the Monk. This Paraclisis may be used at any time throughout the year. The Great Paraclisis, which is only sung during the Dormition Fast, was composed in the thirteenth century by the Emperor Theodore II Ducas Lascaris, in exile due to the Fourth Crusade. As a rule these two services are sung alternately on successive nights during this Fast (the Great Paraclisis is always sung on Sundays). Neither service is sung on Saturday night or on the eves of the Great Feasts themselves.

For What Do We Pray?

Our liturgical books indicate that this service is prayed "in times of distress and sorrow of soul." The opening troparion expresses these emotions: "We will never cease, O Mother of God, although unworthy, to proclaim your power. If you no longer intercede for us, who will deliver us from so many misfortunes? Who would ever have preserved us free until now? We shall never leave you, O Lady, for you always save your servants from all tribulations."

The Canon of the Small Paraclisis is sung to a lively melody and expresses confidence in the Theotokos' care for us in troparia such as these:

"You, who carried within you the Benefactor of all and the Cause of every good favor, let His abundant grace spring forth to all of us. You have the fullness of power, since you've given birth to the Christ, the almighty One."

"Give me your pure joy, Virgin all-pure and immaculate, you who gave birth to the Cause of happiness, and fill my heart with the gladness of your Son, our God."

The Great Paraclisis adds other notes to our picture of the Virgin as our Intercessor:

"I profess you, O Lady, to be truly Theotokos: you, who have both banished and triumphed over the might of death; for as the source of Life, you freed me from Hades' bonds, raising me to life, though I was fallen down to earth."

"The turmoils of this life encircle me like bees around a honeycomb, O Virgin. They have seized my heart and now hold it captive, and I am pierced with the stings of afflictions, O Maiden; yet, O All-holy one, be my defender, my helper and my rescuer."

One unusual feature of these canons is the following pair of hymns sung after each ode with a metany after each verse:

"Deliver your servants from all dangers, O Mother of God, for to you, after God, we flee for refuge. You are our impregnable fortress, our intercessor.

"O Mother of God, worthy of all praise, look down with compassion upon the ills of my afflicted body and heal the infirmities of my soul."

Finally, the celebrants solemnly venerate the icon of the Theotokos as the following glorification (or megalynarion) is sung: "May the lips of all heretics be sealed because they refuse to bow before your all-holy icon, which is fashioned after the blessed *Hodigitria* depicted by the holy

Luke the Apostle." This hymn reflects the iconoclastic controversy during which this service was composed. The iconoclasts refused to venerate icons of Christ, His Mother or the saints and for over a century persecuted those who did venerate them.

The *Hodigitria* mentioned here is the image of Christ enthroned on the arm of His Mother who points to Him, showing us the way to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The original of this icon was reputedly painted by St. Luke. The most famous icon in Constantinople, it was lost during the fall of the city to the Turks in 1453.

Procession of the Cross

Another observance associated with this Fast in the Byzantine tradition is the outdoor procession with the Holy Cross on August 1. Due to its climate Constantinople was subject to insect-borne diseases at this time of summer. A procession was held each day of the Fast praying for relief. Water was blessed and sprinkled over the city as well. Today this observance is remembered on the first of this month with a procession and the Lesser Blessing of Water.

August 1 – The Holy Maccabees

WHEN WE READ THE GOSPELS we regularly come across stories of the Lord Jesus contesting with the Pharisees about observance of the Sabbath and other precepts of the Law. What we may not know is that the Jews themselves had come close to abolishing the Law themselves in favor of adopting Greek culture.

By the second century BC the Jerusalem elite had become extremely Hellenized. They had adopted many Greek practices and looked unfavorably on many aspects of their own tradition. This is described at the beginning of the First Book of Maccabees: "*In those days lawless men came forth from Israel, and misled many, saying, 'Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles round about us, for since we separated from them many evils have come upon us.' This proposal pleased them, and some of the people eagerly went to the king. He authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil*" (1 Macc 1:11-15).

This development was opposed by Jewish traditionalists who upheld the Torah and its practices such as circumcision. The conflict became so pronounced that it amounted to a civil war.

At that time the Jewish kingdom was a vassal state of the Greek Seleucid Empire. Its king, Antiochus IV sided with the elite and entered the conflict. He had successfully pursued Hellenizing policies in Syria and Phoenicia and thought to do the same in Jerusalem. "*After subduing Egypt, Antiochus returned in the one hundred and forty-third year. He went up against Israel and came to Jerusalem with a strong force. He arrogantly entered the sanctuary and took the golden altar, the lampstand for the light, and all its utensils. He took also the table for the bread of the Presence, the cups for drink offerings, the bowls, the golden censers, the curtain, the crowns, and the gold decoration on the front of the temple; he stripped it all off. He took the*

silver and the gold, and the costly vessels; he took also the hidden treasures which he found. Taking them all, he departed to his own land" (1 Macc 1:20-24).

Judas and the Maccabees

Resistance to the Hellenizers was strongest in areas outside of Jerusalem. In the town of Modi'im near the Jordan the sons of the priest Mattathias sparked a revolt against Antiochus and the Jerusalem elite. In 166 BC his son Judas – called the "Maccabee" (Hammer) – led a kind of guerrilla war against the Seleucids. He was ultimately victorious, and his brother Jonathan became High Priest. The temple was rededicated, accompanied by a miracle which Jews today celebrate at the Feast of Hanukkah. The Maccabees could only find one small jug of uncontaminated oil for lighting the Menorah: enough to last one day. Miraculously the Menorah remained lit for eight days when further oil could be obtained.

One of the incidents which sparked the revolt is described in the Second Book of Maccabees: "*It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, 'What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers*'" (2 Macc 7:1, 2).

One after the other, each of the seven brothers were tortured and killed before the eyes of their mother. We read that they "…*encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, 'The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song which bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, He will have compassion on His servants'*" (2 Macc 7:5, 6).

Their mother encourages her sons to remain faithful, knowing that God would reward them in the life to come: "*I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws*" (2 Macc 7:22, 23). After seeing her seven sons die rather than violate the Law, the mother was also killed.

This family is remembered on August 1 in both the Greek and Latin Churches (older form) as the Holy Maccabees although they were not, in fact, members of that family. They are not named in 2 Maccabees but are traditionally known as Solomonia and her sons Habim, Antonin, Guriah, Eleazar, Eusebon, Hadim (or Halim), and Marcellus. Also commemorated is their teacher, Eleazar (mentioned in 2 Macc 6:18-31).

The Books of Maccabees

Although the story of the Maccabee family and of these martyrs is well known in Jewish lore and is written in the Talmud, the Books of the Maccabees are not found in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew original of 1 Macc has been lost and it only survives in a Greek translation found in the Septuagint. The other books with this name were all written in Greek.

All told, there are four Books of the Maccabees in existence. The first three are found in the Septuagint, the Bible of the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria. As such they are found in the canon of most Eastern Churches. The fourth book is generally found in the appendix.

The Latin Vulgate, official translation used by Roman Catholics, included only the first two Books of Maccabees. The other books are considered apocryphal. Protestant Bibles, based on the Hebrew, do not contain these books. Martin Luther reportedly said, "I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all." His objections were doctrinal as this book illustrates the value of prayer for the dead (2 Macc 12:42-46) and of the intercession of the saints (2 Macc 15:11–17).

On the Holy Maccabee Martyrs

The souls of the righteous are in the hands of the Lord: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the forefathers before the Law was given. These are the ancestors of the Maccabees whom we now praise. For, as descendants of Abraham, mighty in soul and zealous for the faith of their forefather Abraham, they struggled lawfully even unto death for piety. Having been raised in piety, in suffering lawfully they denounced the ungodliness of the prideful Antiochus, and in valuing this transitory life as nothing for the sake of that which is everlasting, they offered all to God: their souls, courage, understanding, their tender bodies, and their rewards for having been raised in purity. Oh the pious root from whom you sprang forth, Oh Maccabees! Oh your holy mother, who gave birth to sons equal in number to the days of the week! Pray for us, together with your mother Solomonia and the wise priest Eleazar, O Maccabees, when you stand before Christ God, for whose sake you labored to receive from Him the fruits of your labors, and earnestly entreat for mankind; for whatsoever He desires He does, fulfilling the desires of you who fear Him.

Apostichon of Vespers, August 1

August 6 – Feast of the Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ

In Your Light We See Light

"I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD" (JN 8:12). These familiar words of the Lord Jesus reflect one of the most popular images in the Scriptures, but what do they mean? How is Jesus the light of the world?

The rest of this verse (pardon the expression) 'sheds light' on what is meant here. "*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.*" Here and in a number of other places Jesus is portrayed as a beacon: one who guides along the right path, who illumines the way for us. He is the "Giver of light," the One bringing light to our hearts. To say He is light in this way is to talk about what He does.

But there is another way to see Christ as light. He is light, not only because of what He does for us but because of what He is. "*God is light and in Him is no darkness at all*" (1 Jn 1:5). God is not described here as light illumining our minds and hearts, but as He is in Himself: Light in His innermost being.

Based on the Gospel message, the Church proclaims the Lord Jesus as "Light from Light" (Nicene Creed), the "Joyful Light of the holy glory of the Immortal Father, the Heavenly, the Holy, the Blessed: Jesus Christ" (third century vespers hymn). As God is Light in Himself, so too the incarnate Christ is the Light of the Father. "*I and the Father are one*" (Jn 10:30).

As far back as the third century the Fathers used our experience of the sun to illustrate this mystery. Like others before him, St. Cyril, the teacher of the Slavs, reflected, "Do you see in the heavens the brilliant sphere of the sun and how from it light is begotten and warmth proceeds? God the Father is like the sphere of the sun, without beginning or end. From Him is eternally begotten God the Son, like light from the sun; just as there comes warmth together with light from the sun, the Holy Spirit proceeds. Each one is distinguished separately: the sphere of the sun and the light and the warmth — these are not three suns, but one sun in the heavens. So also, in the Holy Trinity: there are three Persons, but God is one and indivisible."

The Light of Mt. Tabor

Christ was concretely manifested as light at His transfiguration: "*His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light*" (Mt 17:2) – "*white and glistening*" (Lk 9:29), "*such as no launderer on earth can whiten them*" (Mk 9:3). For a moment the disciples glimpsed what had been hidden since the Incarnation: the Word of God, radiant with divine glory, in the person of Jesus.

In icons of the Transfiguration, this radiance is depicted by a geometric figure behind the representation of the Lord called a mandorla. While depictions of Christ during His earthly ministry show His head surrounded by a cross and a halo, icons representing Him in moments beyond time and space (the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, the Dormition) envelop His whole body in this light of glory.

This same figure is found in icons of the conversion of St. Paul. Christ, the "Radiant Light" was manifested to Saul of Tarsus (St. Paul) on the road to Damascus as "*a light from the sky brighter than the sun*" (Acts 26:13). While this Light briefly blinded Saul by its brilliance, it enabled him to see ever more clearly "*the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed*" (Col 1:26).

In the Church the light experienced by Saul has been identified with the light that shone on Tabor, the Radiant Light of the Father, Jesus Christ. As we sing on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, "Christ who had been radiant in light on the mountain, blinded your bodily eyes; but He allowed your soul to see the Trinity" (from the Canon, Ode 1).

The "Uncreated Light" of God

In the Gospels we find two seemingly contradictory understandings of our ability to know God. On the one hand we are told, "*No one has seen God at any time*" (Jn 1:18). On the other hand we hear, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Mt 5:8). In the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nyssa showed how both statements are true. He taught that the essence of God was unknowable. Like the sun in the imagery cited above, God in His deepest being is unapproachable. The energies of God – His "Light" and "Warmth" – have been made known to us and we can truly know God in His energies. In the fourteenth century, St Gregory Palamas applied this teaching to the Transfiguration. He explained that when the Apostles witnessed the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor, that they were seeing the actual uncreated light of God.

Reflecting the Divine Light

We too, Palamas insisted, can experience God's divine energies even though we can never know His essence: "for those who love each other all nature is filled with the light which seems to radiate from the other." Many saints who have loved deeply have reflected this light. Perhaps the first was the Protomartyr St. Stephen who witnessed to Christ before the council of Jewish elders in Jerusalem. "*And looking steadfastly on Stephen, they saw his face as it had been the face of an angel*" (Acts 6:15).

St Simeon the New Theologian, writing in the eleventh century, described his own experience in similar words: "He gives Himself totally to me, unworthy as I am, and I am filled with His love and beauty. I am sated with pleasure and divine tenderness. I share in the Light. I participate also in the glory. My face shines like that of my beloved and all my members become bearers of Light."

The most compelling witness to such an experience comes from Nicholas Motovilov. In 1831 he wrote of seeing St Seraphim of Sarov transfigured with the divine light. They had been discussing how a person can acquire the grace of the Holy Spirit but Motovilov was puzzled: "I do not understand how I can be certain that I am in the Spirit of God." Finally, as he described it, "Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: 'We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?'

"I replied: 'I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain.'

"Father Seraphim said: 'Don't be alarmed, your Godliness! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am.'

"Then, bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: 'Thank the Lord God for His unutterable mercy to us! You saw that I did not even cross myself; and only in my heart I prayed mentally to the Lord God and said within myself: 'Lord, grant him to see clearly with his bodily eyes that descent of Your Spirit which You grant to Your servants when You are pleased to appear in the light of Your magnificent glory.' And you see, my son, the Lord instantly fulfilled

the humble prayer of poor Seraphim. How then shall we not thank Him for this unspeakable gift to us both?'"

For a moment the apostles on Tabor saw the light of God which is Christ's by nature. Likewise for a moment Nicholas Motovilov saw the light of God indwelling by grace in the person who is in Christ.

Shining Like the Sun

TOWARDS THE END of Jesus' public ministry He began preparing His disciples for His approaching death and resurrection. In Mt 16 this scene concludes with the following prophecy: "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (v. 28). This is immediately followed by a fulfillment of this prophecy: the holy transfiguration of Christ. As St Gregory Palamas says in his homily on this feast, "It is the light of His own forthcoming transfiguration which He terms the Glory of His Father and of His Kingdom."

At Christ's transfiguration "*some standing here*" – Peter, James and John – witnessed the Lord in the glory of His kingdom, if only for a moment. He was not changed – they were. They were able to see what is always there but which they could not imagine before: that God dwelt in man.

St Gregory Palamas describes it this way: "Christ was transfigured, not by the addition of something He was not, nor by a transformation into something He was not, but by the manifestation to His disciples of what He really was. He opened their eyes so that instead of being blind they could see. While He Himself remained the same, they could now see Him as other than He had appeared to them formerly. For He is '*the true light*' (Jn 1:9), the beauty of divine glory, and He shone forth like the sun."

As St Ephrem the Syrian expressed it, "They saw two suns; one in the sky, as usual, and one unusually; one visible in the firmament and lighting the world, and one, His face, visible to them alone" (*Sermon on the Transfiguration,* 8). In one sense we can say that Christ was not transfigured; it was the apostles' ability to see Him which was transfigured.

"What He Really Was"

For a moment Christ was revealed to the disciples as what He really was: God incarnate in our human flesh. "We believe that at the transfiguration He manifested not some other sort of light, but only that which was concealed beneath His fleshly exterior. This Light was the Light of the Divine Nature, and as such, it was Uncreated and Divine" (St Gregory Palamas, *Homily on the Transfiguration*).

This Light was manifested to the disciples in the radiance of His face and garments: "*His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light*" (Mt 17:2). As Mark describes it, "*His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them*" (Mk 9:3). The immaterial divine nature of the Son of God in manifested in the physical sign of a shining face and garments because this was all that the disciples could absorb.

As we sing in the troparion of this feast, Christ was "showing Your disciples as much of Your glory as they could behold."

Over succeeding centuries the Church deepened its understanding of the incarnation, but not without disagreement. It took several hundred years and several Ecumenical Councils for the Church to articulate its faith in Christ as the incarnate Word of God. By the fourth century the Church was calling Christ "Light from Light, true God from true God… of one essence with the Father" but it took several more centuries and councils to grasp the implications of that statement.

As iconography developed it settled on one particular form to represent the divine nature of the light perceived by the disciples. The *mandorla* is a design made up of overlapping geometrical shapes which surrounds the image of Christ in icons of the transfiguration. The basic mandorla – an Italian word meaning *almond* – contains three round or oval concentric circles, in shades of blue or gold, representing the Trinity. The innermost circle is of the deepest shade representing the unseen Father. Other geometrical shapes represent the energy of the divine light shining upon the disciples. The mandorla is generally used in icons representing the glorified Christ at His transfiguration and resurrection and when receiving His Mother at her dormition.

What We Are Meant to Become

In the mystery of Christ's transfiguration the Church has caught a glimpse of what those who are in Christ are meant to be: persons who in their humanity can have God dwelling in them, reflecting that presence as light. The Lord Himself tells us that at His second coming "the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mt 1:43). The custom of depicting saints and angels with haloes derives from this prophetic statement of Christ.

Becoming "righteous" is our task in this life, in preparation for the glory to come. In both the Old and New Testaments we are frequently instructed how we may become righteous. In the New Testament, however, these instructions are phrased in terms of God dwelling in us. "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Col 1:27) is the One whose presence within us guarantees our righteousness before God. This is the "*mystery hidden from eternity*" (Col 1:26), which the Greek Fathers called *theosis*, the process of our transformation by the presence of God within us.

This process of *theosis* begins with our baptism. As we sing so often in our services, "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*" (Gal 3:27). God dwells within us but requires that we "put on Christ" by the way we live. "*We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*" (Rom 6:4). Our cooperation with God dwelling in us to transform us is called *synergy* by the Fathers: the life-long task of consciously becoming God-like in our thoughts, words and actions in order to radiate the presence of God within us by baptism.

Despite all our best efforts, none of us – not even the saints – can so unwaveringly combat our passions that we realize our potential on our own. And so Christ has given us an outward sign of His love in the mystery of the Eucharist to which we can return again and again. By sharing in

this holy mystery we can reinforce our awareness of His saving presence in us and derive the strength we need for our daily ascent to God.

Through the holy mysteries and our striving to live like Christ we can attain a likeness to God and union with Him so far as possible. We who are not holy by nature can become holy, and become partakers of glory.

Looking to the Last Day

In the Second Epistle of St Peter we read his eye-witness account of the transfiguration (2 Pt 1:16-18). This is what follows: "*And so we have this sure prophetic word, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*" (v.19). The transfiguration is thus a prophetic anticipation of Christ's glorious second coming when the "morning star" (Christ) will fill us with His light.

The transfiguration, then, symbolizes the life to come and thus the goal of every Christian pursuit. As St Gregory the Theologian expressed it in his Third Oration *On the Son*, the holy transfiguration of Christ initiates us "into the mystery of the future".

O Giver of life, You bent down to the pit without falling into it and raised me up who had fallen. You bore my foul-smelling corruption untouched, and made me sweet-smelling with the myrrh of Your divine nature.

Canon of the Octoechos, Tone 5

August 15 – Feast of the Holy Dormition of the Theotokos

IN BYZANTINE CHURCHES the first Great Feast in the liturgical calendar is the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8). The feast of her Holy Dormition (August 15), coming at the end of the Church year, brings this cycle to a close. Like a musical masterwork, our annual remembrance of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ begins with an "overture" (the birth of His Mother) and concludes with a "coda" (her entry into the new life which is promised to us).

What Is a "Dormition"?

Our English word echoes the French and Latin words for "sleep." The corresponding Greek word, *koimisis*, appears in English as "cemetery," or "sleeping place." By calling death a "repose" or a "falling asleep" we are affirming our faith that death is not an ultimate reality.

Mary's is not the only Dormition observed in our Church. The first saints to be commemorated were the martyrs, witnesses to Christ at the risk of their life; their death was considered as a "crowning" to their testimony. Some saints not martyred were remembered on the day of their peaceful death, their dormition. Thus we remember the Dormition of St Anne, mother of the Theotokos (July 25) and of St. John the Theologian, the only apostle not martyred (September 26). The Coptic Church also remembers the Dormition of St Joseph (August 2).

The Tradition of the Virgin's Repose

Several writings describing the death of the Virgin have come down to us; the earliest still in existence dates from the fifth century. But, according to biblical scholar Lino Cignelli, "All of them are traceable back to a single primitive document, a Judaeo-Christian prototype, clearly written within the mother church of Jerusalem some time during the second century, and, in all probability, composed for liturgical use right at the Tomb of Our Lady."

The early Tradition generally places Mary's death in Jerusalem, a few years after the death and resurrection of Christ. According to one early version, "…the apostles carried the couch, and laid down her precious and holy body in Gethsemane in a new tomb. And, behold, a perfume of sweet savor came forth out of the holy sepulcher of our Lady the Mother of God; and for three days the voices of invisible angels were heard glorifying Christ our God, who had been born of her. And when the third day was ended, the voices were no longer heard; and from that time forth all knew that her spotless and precious body had been transferred to paradise."

Other of these writings speak of all the apostles being summoned and/or transported miraculously to attend the Holy Virgin at her passing. When Mary reposes, they see Christ taking her soul to heaven. When they bury her body as the Lord had instructed, the apostles once more see Christ. In one version Peter appeals to Him: "It had seemed to us Your servants to be right that, just as You, having vanquished death, now reign in glory, You should raise up the body of Your mother and take her with You in joy into heaven." Christ restores her soul to her body and glorifies both with Him. In all these accounts Mary enters eternal life in the fullness of her spiritual and bodily existence.

Employing elements of these accounts, the Churches of the East and then the West began to celebrate the feast of Mary's passing, which became widespread before the end of the first millennium AD. The eighth century Father, St John of Damascus, has left us several sermons on the meaning of Mary's Dormition as well as a canon which we still sing at Orthros on this feast. "What, then, shall we call this mystery of yours? Death? Your blessed soul is naturally parted from your blissful and undefiled body. The body is delivered to the grave, yet it does not remain in death, nor is it the prey of corruption. The body of her, whose virginity remained unspotted in child-birth, was preserved in its incorruption, and was taken to a better, more divine place, where there is no death, only eternal life" (*First Homily on the Dormition*).

The Resurrection of the Body

The Dormition of the Theotokos points to an aspect of eternal life only briefly sketched out in the Scriptures. There we read that the risen Christ is "*the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Cor 15:20). To call Him "first-fruits" presumed that there is more to the crop, as St Paul elaborates: "*Christ the first-fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming*" (v. 23).

Mary's participation in eternal life is unique – she is not awaiting the return of her Son; she now fully shares in the eternal life in body as well as spirit by a special gift of grace. Some may see this belief as unscriptural, contradicting the very words of St Paul. Rather they confirm by a historic moment what would otherwise simply be an allegation. Mary's dormition demonstrates that St Paul's teaching is not mere words. Human beings *can* share physically in the Resurrection and Mary is there to prove it.

In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Mary's dormition "…is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians. [*It is significant that this ¶ concludes by paraphrasing our troparion of the Dormition in witness to the meaning of this feast.*] In giving birth you kept your virginity; in your Dormition you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death." (¶966).

What Mary Left Behind

One tradition repeated in several early texts concerns the sash or girdle of the Theotokos. Thomas was supposedly the last Apostle to arrive and missed venerating her body. According to the seventh-century *Passing of the Blessed Virgin Mary* attributed to Joseph of Arimathea, Thomas saw the most holy body of the blessed Mary going up into heaven, and prayed her to give him a blessing. She heard his prayer, and threw him the sash which she had about her.

Parts of this girdle are venerated to this day, chiefly at the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos and at the Syriac Orthodox "Church of the Girdle" in Homs, Syria. During the eighteenth century when the Melkite Patriarchate of Antioch was being established some iconographers were moved to "Catholicize" the icon of the Dormition. They showed the Theotokos giving St Thomas a rosary instead of her sash, contributing to the popular notion that the Latin rosary was of Apostolic and Eastern origin.

Mary and Ephesus?

Today some claim that the Theotokos died in Ephesus where St John the Theologian lived for many years because the Lord Jesus had entrusted His mother to him as He was dying on the cross.

In the nineteenth century a house claimed to be that of the Virgin was unearthed near Ephesus, based on a supposed vision of Anne Catherine Emerich. This shrine became popular in the West; however there was never any early tradition connecting Mary's death and burial with the city of Ephesus.

The Burial of the Theotokos

AN INCREASING NUMBER of Byzantine churches are observing the Feast of the Dormition by conducting the Burial Service of the Theotokos. This observance comes to us from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the traditional site of her death and burial.

On the morning of August 14 a procession sets out from the Patriarchate, bearing the icon of the Dormition. They leave the Old City and cross the Kedron Valley, arriving at Gethsemane and the tomb of the Theotokos. There the people, passing beneath the icon, enter the church where the burial shroud of the Theotokos has been displayed for veneration. On the closing of the feast, August 23, another procession returns the icon and the shroud to the Patriarchate.

The Tomb of the Holy Virgin

We do not know when the site of the Virgin's tomb in Gethsemane, at the foot of Mount Olivet, became a place of Christian devotion. Some say that the first church there had been built by St Helena in the fourth century. There was clearly a church there in the fifth century. It is well documented that the first Patriarch of Jerusalem, St Juvenal, had taken the veil of the Theotokos from this shrine and sent it to the Empress Pulcheria who had asked him for the Virgin's "relics" after the Council of Chalcedon (451). The patriarch replied, "Three days after her repose, the body of the Holy Virgin was raised up to heaven, and the Tomb in the Garden of Gethsemane bears only her Veil." The patriarch then sent this relic to Constantinople where it was then enshrined in the church of the Theotokos at Blachernae, a district of Constantinople.

A church was built at the site of the virgin's tomb in 582 by the Byzantine Emperor Maurice. Thus church was destroyed during the Persian invasion of 614 but rebuilt soon afterward. During the Crusades it was destroyed again, leaving only the crypt – the actual place of the tomb – and the steps descending to it. Today the crypt-church is served jointly by the Greek Patriarchate and the Armenian Patriarchate. The church also contains chapels used by the Coptic and Syriac Orthodox.

The Burial Service

The first record of such a service performed outside Jerusalem dates from the fifteenth century. In Russia rectors of churches dedicated to the Mother of God were encouraged to erect a tomb or bier on the solea in which the icon of the feast could be enshrined. Matins could then be served before this tomb.

It was also in the fifteenth century that the lamentations on the burial of Christ were composed in Jerusalem. They are sung today in the Orthros of Holy Saturday, one of the more popular moments in the rites of the Holy Week in the Greek and Middle Eastern Churches. Due to the interaction of Greeks and Italians in this period we often see a burial of Christ service, including the Greek melodies of the Lamentations, used by Italian and Spanish Roman Catholics as well.

Around one hundred years later, in 1541. the Greek Metropolitan Dionysios of Old Patras in western Greece composed the service for the burial of the Theotokos, in imitation of the service for the burial of Christ. It is this service which has spread throughout the Byzantine world today.

At first the principal image used in this service was the icon of the Dormition, as in Jerusalem. As the burial of the Theotokos came to be celebrated as imitation of the Burial of Christ, use of the shroud of the Theotokos became popular.

Passing through Death to Life

Some people feel that this imitation of the burial of Christ detracts from people's understanding of Pascha as the climactic event of world history, the death and resurrection of the Savior. The Holy Virgin, after all, did not rise from the dead as Christ did; she lived and died in a purely human, if immaculate way.

Since there is no mention of the Virgin's death in the New Testament, some Christians have come to believe that Mary did not die at all but was translated to glory without being subject to

death. There is no evidence nor is there a tradition that this was believed in the Christian East. The Theotokos died by the necessity of her human nature, which is indivisibly bound up with the corruption of this world. Like us she was mortal. Unlike us, her natural mortality did not lead her to sin (spiritual death).

The Church believes that Mary died as all humans die, but that it was granted that she enter now in her body the glorification awaiting all the saints in the life of the age to come. The Theotokos thus becomes a sign confirming that Christ's death and resurrection truly accomplished for all mankind, not just for Himself, the destruction of Hades and the defeat of Death. Her Repose demonstrates the reality of the transformation of death from a fearful enemy into a joyous passage to life.

Besides pointing back to the death and resurrection of Christ, the Repose of the Theotokos points ahead to what is to come: that all who are in Christ will share in the life of the angels in the resurrected body. As Father Alexander Schmemann put it, "Mary is not the great exception;" rather she is the great example given to us as a witness of what is meant for us all. As we say in the Creed, we "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." The Feast of the Dormition gives us a glimpse of what that might be.

Lamentations at the Tomb of the Theotokos (*Third Stasis*)

Ev'ry generation
to your tomb comes bringing
its dirge of praises, O Virgin.

All of creation
to the tomb comes bringing
a farewell hymn to our Lady.

Christ's holy Disciples
tend to the body
of Mary, Mother of my God.

Orders of Angels
and Archangels
invisibly hymn her presence.

Pious Women
with the Apostles
now cry out their lamentations.

She who was at Cana
at the marriage
has been called with the Apostles.

The Master descends now
to Gethsemane
with countless hosts of heaven.

Let us go out quickly
To meet the Lord Jesus
Who comes once more among us.

Let us be attentive
God is now speaking
with His most pure Mother:

"Behold now your Son
comes to bring you
into His home in the heavens.

Come indeed, My Mother,
come into divine joy
and enter into the kingdom."

"What will I bring You,
O my Son, the God-Man"
the Maiden cried to the Master.

"What will I bring You,
O my God in heaven
except my soul and body.

The Father I glorify
to the Son I sing a hymn
the Holy Spirit I worship."

August 16 – Translation of the Holy Mandylion from Odessa to Constantinople

Bowing before Your Image

MANY AMERICANS ARE FAMILIAR with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, miraculously imprinted on the cape (tilma) of a Nahuatl Aztec in sixteenth-century Mexico. Such an image is called "not made with hands," meaning that its origin is spiritual or even divine.

The Guadalupe cape is not the first image of this sort in Christian history. The most famous icon not made with hands is the image of Christ's holy face known as the Mandylion (sometimes translated as "towel" or "napkin"): Its history is fascinating and not altogether clear.

The Image of Edessa

From at least the sixth to the tenth century a "God-made image" of Christ was venerated in Edessa, a Syriac city on the Persian border. In the year 525 the Daisan River, a tributary of the Euphrates, flooded part of the city. During the reconstruction of the city wall the image, on cloth, was discovered hidden in the wall over one of the city gates, reportedly inscribed "O Christ our God, no one who hopes in You will ever be put to shame."

Contemporary writers associated this image with the story of the first-century king of Edessa, Abgar, who had written to Christ asking Him to visit Edessa and heal him of an illness. The Lord reportedly wrote back saying that He could not come but would send one of His disciples in due time. After the resurrection, the disciple Thaddaeus (Addai) brought the Gospel to Edessa and reportedly healed the king. The fourth-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea recorded this story in his *History of the Church* and claimed to have seen the letter in the Edessa chancery and translated it. The pilgrim nun Egeria, who visited Edessa in 384 also claimed to have seen this letter.

In 593 Evagrius the Stoic in his *Ecclesiastical History* mentions that Edessa was home to a "God-made image" of the face of Christ imprinted on cloth. The story quickly spread throughout the Churches. The eighth-century Pope of Rome, Gregory II, described it as a commonly known fact and St John of Damascus cited it in his work *On the Holy Images*. This image was regularly connected to the stories of Christ, Abgar and Addai. In the version recounted by John of Damascus, a painter sent by King Abgar to make "a likeness of the Lord" could not do so "because of the brightness that shone from His countenance." The Lord then placed a garment over His face to create the image.

From Edessa to Constantinople

From the sixth century to the eighth an icon of Christ on cloth served as a banner for the Byzantine army. It had led the army of Heraclius in his seventh-century battles against the Persians but had disappeared in 705, according to the Byzantine writer Georgios Kedrenos, during an interruption in the reign of Justinian II.

In 944 Edessa, then under Islamic rule, was besieged by a Byzantine army led by its leading general, John Kourkouas, who exchanged a group of Muslim prisoners for the "God-made image." It was taken to Constantinople where it was received in triumph and enshrined in the chapel of the imperial palace. It is this event which the Byzantine Churches still commemorate on August 16.

The Mandylion remained in Constantinople until the city was sacked by the Crusaders in 1204. Many of its treasures were looted and taken to Western Europe. The Crusader-King Baldwin II sold a number of Byzantine treasures to King Louis IX of France. The relics were enshrined in his Sainte Chapelle in Paris until they disappeared during the French Revolution.

The Mandylion and the Shroud of Turin

The image of Edessa was described in a sixth-century Greek text as a "*tetradiplon*" (folded four times). Several modern authors have argued that the Shroud of Turin, folded in this manner, would display only the holy face. They also point to the distinct crease marks on the Shroud, suggesting that it had been folded for a long time. Finally they cite a certain Gregory, a tenth-century treasurer at Hagia Sophia, who said that the image of Edessa was painted "in sweat and blood." They also note that scientists have identified traces of pollen on the Shroud native to all three of the locations associated with the Mandylion: Jerusalem, Edessa and Constantinople.

Images of the Image

The earliest known Byzantine icon of the Mandylion is preserved at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. It has been dated to mid-tenth century, when the actual Mandylion was brought to Constantinople. Since then many icons have appeared, some showing the cloth; others depicting only the holy face.

Icons of the Mandylion present us with a problem when we go to venerate them. Iconographic etiquette dictates that we kiss the hands or feet of Christ in icons, never the face. On icons of the Mandylion it is proper to kiss the cloth, if shown, or the hair but not the face. As we say in the prayer before Communion, "I will not give You a kiss like Judas did."

The Holy Mandylion itself or icons of it – indeed any icon of Christ – point to the divine icon truly made without hands: the Lord Jesus Himself. "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation; for by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him*" (Col 1:15-16). He is, as St. Gregory of Nyssa, wrote, "The Wisdom of God, not made by human hands, now become a creature for our sake."

When Christ chose His disciples and sent them forth He said to them, "*Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see; for I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it*" (Lk 10:23, 24). The Mandylion, the Shroud and icons of them give us a glimpse of what they saw and more.

Before Your most pure image we bow in worship, begging forgiveness for our sins, O Christ God; because You chose of Your own free will to ascend upon the cross in the flesh in order to deliver from the Enemy's bondage those You had created. For this reason we cry out to You in thanksgiving, "You have filled all things with joy, O our Savior, when You came to save the world!" (*Troparion*)

August 20 – The Holy Prophet Samuel

THE CHURCH COMMEMORATES on its calendar holy men and women throughout the ages: from the first days of the Old Testament, from the New Testament and from the era of the Church. We honor the saints of today, rejoicing that God is still bestowing His Spirit in our own time. We revere the Old Testament saints, who illustrate that there have always been people who responded to God's love, even in times and places far different from our own. One such holy figure from the Old Testament is the holy prophet Samuel, whom our Church remembers on August 20.

Samuel is revered as the last of the Judges, the tribal chiefs who ruled the Hebrew people between the time of Moses and Joshua (c. 1250 BC) and the naming of Saul as the first king of Israel in c. 1050 BC. His story is told in the Old Testament's first book of Samuel. Four books in our Bibles, called 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings (called 1 - 4 Kingdoms in the LXX) tell the story of the rise of the unified Jewish kingdom in the tenth and ninth centuries BC.

The Birth of Samuel

Samuel's family was of the tribe of Ephraim and lived in a town called Ramathaim- Zophim (or Rama) some 4 or 5 miles northwest of the later city of Jerusalem. His father, Elkanah, had two wives Peninnah, who had several sons and daughters, and Hannah, who was reproached by Peninnah for being childless.

One time, on the family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah vowed that, were God to give her a son, she would dedicate him to God's service. Many of the Fathers, pointing to Hannah's silent prayer, saw it as a model of heartfelt, if unspoken prayer. Although her prayer could not be heard by those nearby, it was heard by God.

A while after returning home, Hannah conceived and bore a son whom she called Samuel ("asked of God") because the Lord had listened to her prayer. When the child was older. Hannah returned with him to Shiloh to give thanks and offer him to the Lord with the prayer we know as the Canticle of Hannah (1 Sm 2:1-10):

"*My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation. No one is holy like the LORD, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God...The bows of the mighty are broken, and those who stumbled are girded with strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, and the hungry have ceased to hunger. Even the barren has borne seven, and she who has many children has become feeble. ... The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes and make them inherit the throne of glory. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and He has set the world upon them. He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness. ... The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to His king, And exalt the horn of His anointed*.

We chant Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving as the third biblical canticle at Orthros during the Great Fast.

Samuel Is Called by God

The infant Samuel remained at Shiloh and grew to assist Eli the priest of the shrine. This is why he is often depicted in icons holding a censer. There is a touching story describing Samuel's first experience of God, when, according to Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Bk 5)., he was twelve years old. It happened "… *while Samuel was lying down, that the LORD called Samuel. And he answered, "Here I am!" So he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." And he said, "I did not call; lie down again." And he went and lay down. Then the LORD called yet again,*

"Samuel!" So Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." He answered, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." (Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor was the word of the LORD yet revealed to him.)

"And the LORD called Samuel again the third time, so he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you did call me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD had called the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel answered, "Speak, for Your servant hears"… *And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD*" (1 Sm 3:4-10, 20). In Jewish tradition Samuel is described as being equal to Moses, since God spoke directly to him.

Samuel Becomes Judge

Eli the priest had become the most righteous judge among the Hebrews, but his sons did not take after their father and were known as corrupt. With Eli's death, the unity of the Hebrew tribes began fragmenting until Samuel took Eli's place as principal judge of the nation, traveling on a circuit from Ramah to the shrines of Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah to administer justice.

During Samuel's time as judge the Philistines became the most significant power in the region and, therefore the greatest threat to the independence of the Hebrews. At one point the Philistines even captured the Ark, with its relics of the Exodus, the very symbol of the Israelites' identity as the people of God, and held it for ransom. Finally, the Hebrew chieftains' united under Samuel and defeated the Philistines.

In old age Samuel made his sons judges, but they "*turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice*" (1 Sm 8:3). As a result, the elders pressured Samuel, "*make us a king to judge us like all the nations*" (1 Sam 8:5). With God's guidance Samuel reluctantly agreed to their request but warned them that God was their king – if they wanted an earthly king they would be rejecting Him and inviting tyranny. The chieftains prevailed and Saul was chosen to be their king. Samuel secretly anointed Saul as king, as he would anoint the next king, David indicating their choice by God as ruler of His people. Icons of Samuel often depict him holding a vessel of oil with which he anointed both Saul and his successor, David.

Samuel lived to see God reject Saul as an unrighteous king and select David to replace him. He saw Saul try to have David killed, then finally accept David as God's choice to inherit the kingdom. In 1 Sm 25:1 we are told that Samuel died and was buried at Rama, his home town. Rabbinic tradition says that Samuel lived to be 52 years old.

The traditional site of Samuel's tomb is the Palestinian village of Nabi Samwil, which overlooks Jerusalem. A succession of churches – the last of which became a mosque in the eighteenth century – was built over the tomb which itself houses a synagogue. In the fifth century AD St Jerome wrote that Samuel's remains had been moved to Chalcedon by Emperor Arcadius and the Byzantine monastery in Nabi Samwil was simply a memorial.

Priest, Prophet, Ruler

The prophet Samuel has been seen as a type of Christ, because his ministry included a priestly and a prophetic dimension as well as being a judge and ruler in Israel. Thus he foreshadowed Christ, who offers Himself in sacrifice as priest, teaches prophetically what He hears from the Father (see Jn 15:15), and is glorified on the cross as King of the Jews.

August 29 – Commemoration of the Beheading of the Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John

THE GOSPELS DEPICT St John the Baptist as the "forerunner" or herald announcing the immanent coming of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, we read, "*There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*" (Mk 1:7, 8).

John's work as herald of our salvation was not limited to announcing the beginning of Christ's ministry in Galilee. Our troparion for today's commemoration mentions that John baptized the Lord Jesus. Then, it continues, "You have fought for the sake of truth and proclaimed to those in Hades that God who appeared in the flesh has taken away the sins of the world and bestowed his great mercy upon us." John's ministry continued after death as he announced to the dead in Hades that Christ's coming was close at hand.

The Story of John's Struggle

We read the story of John's final fight "for the sake of truth" in Mark's Gospel. **"***For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. Because John had said to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife*'" (Mk 6:17, 18).

John languished in prison because Herod had a superstitious fear of the prophet. He revered John as a holy man but could not bring himself to follow the Baptist's teachings.

"*Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, 'Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you.' He also swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom"*" (Mk 6:21-23).

What followed has been frequently retold in literature, music, painting and sculpture. Prompted by her mother, Salome asks for the head of John: *"I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter*" (v. 25).

Because of the oath he had sworn in the presence of his guests, Herod agreed and had John beheaded, making possible the prophet's ministry in Hades.

Our Observance of John's Death

Because John, whom the Lord Himself had called the greatest man born of woman, was killed as a result of Herod's birthday revels, the Byzantine Churches observe today as a strict fast: no parties, no luxury foods, no drink. We see where these things can lead.

A number of popular local customs have arisen to mark this day among various Eastern Christians. People may:

- Avoid eating anything on round plates, since Salome asked for John's head "*on a platter*" (Mk 6:25). Use bowls instead.
- Avoid eating any round fruits or vegetables (they resemble a head)
- Avoid eating anything that requires use of knives or anything that cuts.
- Avoid eating or drinking anything red (they remind us of blood).

A contemporary way to observe this commemoration might be to fast and pray for those who have died senselessly at the hands of others through terrorism, armed conflicts or senseless violence. Think of them as John's "companions in suffering.

Come, you people, let us praise the prophet and martyr, the baptizer of the Savior; for, as an angel in the flesh, he denounced Herod, condemning him for committing most iniquitous fornication. And thanks to iniquitous dancing, his precious head is cut off, that he might announce in Hades the glad tidings of the resurrection from the dead. He prays earnestly to the Lord, that our souls be saved.

Let us celebrate the memory of the severed head of the forerunner, which poured forth blood upon the platter then, but now pours forth healings upon the ends of the earth (*Liti Stichera*).

The beheading of the Forerunner was an act of divine providence: the occasion for him to announce the coming of the Savior to the souls in Hades. Let then Herodias lament and weep, for she has asked for murder, preferring the present life and its pleasures to eternal life and God's law (*Kondakion*).